

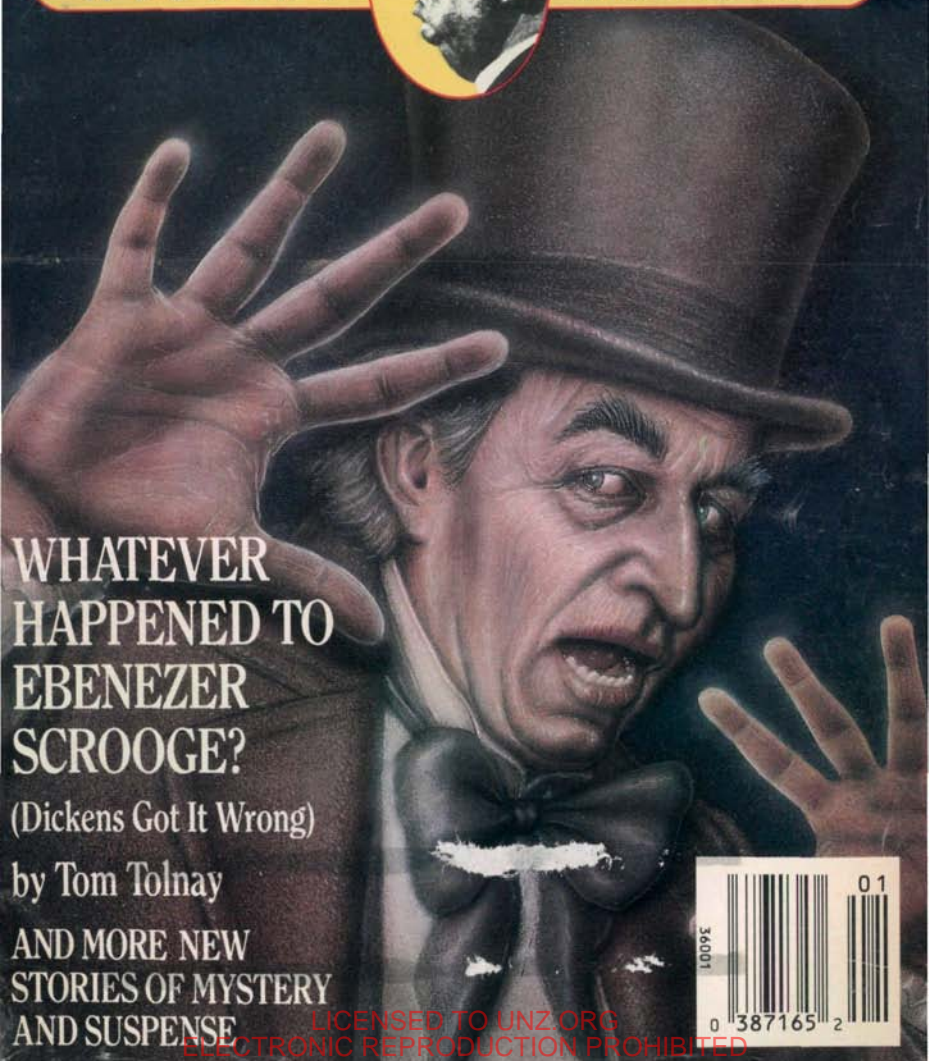
ALFRED

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HITCHCOCK's

MYSTERY

MAGAZINE



WHATEVER
HAPPENED TO
EBENEZER
SCROOGE?

(Dickens Got It Wrong)

by Tom Tolnay

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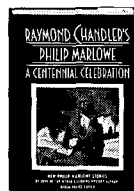
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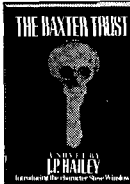
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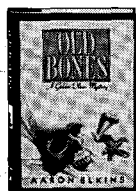


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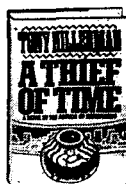
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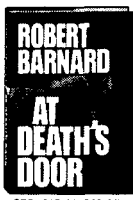
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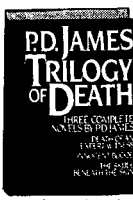
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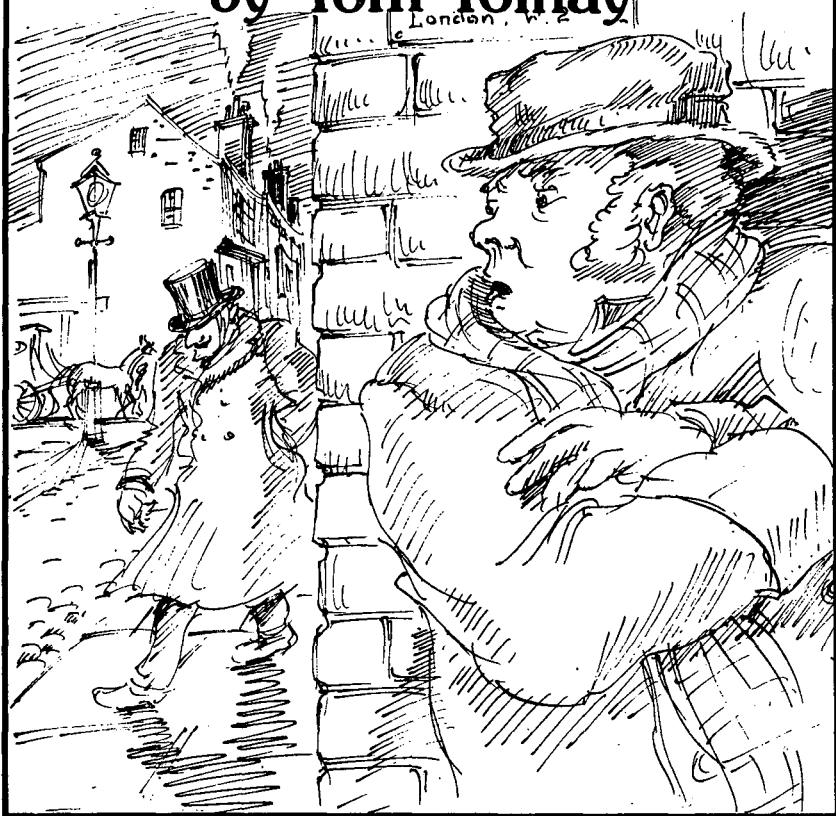
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FICTION

Whatever Became of Ebenezer Scrooge?

by Tom Tolnay



So Ebenezer Scrooge, that squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous old sinner was led into the past, the present, and the future by three apparitions on Christmas Eve, and the horrors that he witnessed, which were his own life and death, convinced him that he'd better repent or else. Not merely in word, but in deed, for his fears of moral retribution

Illustration by Hank Blaustein

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were profound. Next morning, while still in his nightcap, he rewarded a boy handsomely to run to the poulterer's and have a turkey the size of Tiny Tim sent to the humble home of the Cratchit family. After consuming a bowl of gruel and a cup of tea with more relish than such feeble fare justified, he brushed the coal dust from his cuffs and went off on a cold, clear, Christmas Day to join his nephew Fred and family at their holiday feast. Scrooge delighted the children with gifts in his hard-as-flint fists and astonished the grownups with a steady smile on his bloodless face. He tasted of the spiced wassail and joined in the carols in bold voice and bounced their son and daughter upon his knee. It was like old times, with the kind of merriment he had enjoyed so unashamedly at Fezziwig's establishment. (Those were the days when he was a mere apprentice with Dick Wilkins, good old Dick Wilkins, who had been very attached to him—long before Ebenezer's soul had been twisted into an ugly thing by the connivances of commerce.) Later that night, when the cheer had simmered down, and the fire had withdrawn its flames, and a slab of clouds had blocked out the stars, and a cold mist was pressing against the windows, Ebenezer Scrooge, with a wave of his hand, alighted from the glowing doorway of his nephew's home and headed into the gloom of nineteenth century London. It was that sort of penetrating gloom which of times follows hard on the heels of a frolicsome occasion, the way the brightest and most pleasant of rooms becomes dank and dreary when plunged into the bitter darkness of a winter's night. It was the gloom of death itself.

Ebenezer stepped cautiously through the slippery skin of snow that had settled upon the cobblestones, for he was mortal and, as he had reminded the Ghost of Christmas Past, liable to fall. It was feet-stamping cold, and his breath crystallized with each exhalation. The bleakness was so concentrated it seemed to muffle the sputtering gas lamps along his route, but it did not extinguish the gladness in Scrooge's heart, which radiated on the fuel of his recent salvation. So altered was his attitude that as he walked in the direction of his chambers, he kept an expectant eye out for a carriage to carry him forth. Not since he'd been young and wasteful had he hired a carriage; on this particular evening, however, he felt a strong desire to be accompanied by the happy clacking of hoofs and to impress the cabman with a generosity befitting the season. Scrooge spotted a few such conveyances, shiny through the frozen mists, one of them with holly wound in the spokes of its great wheels. But each was loaded with people and packages and

the sounds of mirth, hurrying on toward yet another festivity in celebration of the birth of Christ. By the time he came upon a carriage that was free—a young couple was laughing as they stepped down from the sturdy black vehicle, its springs jouncing from the quick loss of weight—Scrooge had already covered three-quarters of the distance to his rooms. And though the air was as harsh as a rasp, he decided to complete his journey by foot. It seemed more trouble to get in and out of the carriage than the short trip warranted. Besides, a long walk on Christmas night was good for the heart and satisfying to the soul, and a man of business in his time of life had to be attentive to both.

The windows of the low brick houses were gleaming with candles and oil lamps, and the scent of baked breads and sweetmeats wafted over the streets. A few men and women wrapped in green and red scarves bobbed past him on the narrow walk. "Merry Christmas!" said they, raising their hats or saluting, though he did not recognize any of them. Scrooge fingered the brim of his tall hat and smiled as best he could, his cracked face aching from having crowded thirty years of smiling into a single day. What the ghosts had demonstrated to him the previous evening appeared to be decidedly true: There was joy, perhaps even a certain profit, to be collected from being pleasant, from being charitable to others.

Not everyone on that particular London street, on that particular Christmas night, was unknown to Ebenezer Scrooge. Hurrying along on the opposite walk was one Jonathan Wurdlewart, who had business with the firm of Scrooge & Marley. Indeed, his loan was due that very night. And when Wurdlewart spotted a gray-faced old man in a tall black hat moving slowly but with a distinct delight in his step, greeting people as they passed, the debtor ducked into an alley and stared out from the shadows. "It can't be," Wurdlewart muttered, rubbing his tired eyes, "it just can't be." After the old man had passed, and the debtor saw that it was indeed Scrooge himself, he cursed him under his breath as a hypocrite as well as a usurer. For a long while Wurdlewart remained in the shadows, as if pondering what course of action to take. At last he began moving in the direction Scrooge had gone.

Scrooge turned off the broad street and down a narrow byway, and before long this brought him into the district of warehouses and factories and counting houses, not far from where he had inhabited a suite of rooms as cheerless as the London morgue. Those

who had a choice did not wish to live amidst the clank of machinery and the clink of coins, to hear the cries of children when they were struck for lack of productivity. Scrooge resided here to be closer to his commercial interests at all times and because rents were far cheaper. (The rest of the rooms in the lowering pile of stone in which he resided were let out as offices.) Others lived out their time nearby because there was nowhere else for them to go. On this singular night of the year the workers were huddled in their drafty, wretched dwellings, many without coal for their fires; some had no more than boiled potatoes for their tables, the skins of which were served as a side dish to introduce variety to their meals. Their windows were mostly dark. In this district the streets were solitary, and the doorways were cut into black relief, and loose windows rattled in their frames, and the debris of manufacture flapped in the gutters, and the alleys were as grim as the grave. Considering all this, it is little wonder that Scrooge was gradually overtaken by a feeling that someone was following him, and he turned around quickly, but saw no one. It is little wonder the smile fell away from his face and he began to think about time: In a few days yet another year in his paltry allotment of years would be gone, and he would not be another hour richer.

As he came upon his countinghouse, with the weathered sign nailed above the door—Scrooge & Marley—the old man spotted something that made him feel as if a headstone had toppled over into his soul. Across the street from his place of business there was a single lamp burning in the window of Pennerpinch, Ltd. So Gladnought Pennerpinch, Ebenezer's long-time and despised competitor, was working on Christmas night, trying to grab an advantage over Scrooge & Marley! Ebenezer stood as dead-still as a doornail on the crusty walk, regretting passionately having given Cratchit the day off. At year's end we should both have been going over the accounts so as not to fall behind, he thought, so as not to permit that scoundrel Pennerpinch to steal the bread from my mouth! And he clenched his bony fist and shook it at the smoke-blackened brick establishment across the way.

Just then the figure of Pennerpinch, as slick and rigid as an icicle, passed by the window carrying a large ledger, his shadow looming behind him. It was clear to Scrooge that his nemesis was going to do his accounts long into the night. "It's not fair!" Scrooge moaned, and he shivered from standing still too long in the cold. Though he yearned to be home and to free his feet from the tight boots, rather than allow his competitor to expand on the advantage

already gained, he turned up the stairs of his countinghouse. Scrooge slid his hand inside his coat, yanked the ring of numerous keys from his vest pocket, and unlocked one, two, three bolts. Just as he reached out to grip the knob, however, he saw a facial configuration on the iron knocker and quickly withdrew his hand. "Not again!" he declared. Looking more closely, Scrooge realized it was an illusion created by a coating of frost. "Humbug!" Entering and closing the door behind him hastily, he proceeded to relock each of the three devices.

The stale dampness made the office feel colder than the night streets. He passed from Cratchit's outer cell into the larger space, moving to his desk in the dimness the way a blind man feels his way through familiar surroundings. Turning his chair so he could keep an eye on Pennerpinch out the window, he sat down. It was too cold to remove his heavy coat, but unlike Cratchit, Scrooge could work without burning his coal as if it were rubbish. After rubbing his hands together briskly to acquire some free warmth, he struck a match into flame and lit the lamp, bringing the chamber into view. The big desk looked overworked, and dusty wooden shelves were stacked with yellowed ledgers, each representing a year of commerce. The iron stove was as cold and black as its owner's heart. At last Scrooge felt some small glimmer of satisfaction, for he knew that sooner or later Pennerpinch would notice the light coming from Scrooge & Marley.

In the flickering paleness, Scrooge opened the ledger stamped 1843 and began to slide his finger down the long list of debtors. This was how he started every business day, for it comforted him to know that he was owed so much. A quick addition of the receivables alarmed him, however. Cratchit had shortchanged him by nine pence. "The sneaking scoundrel!" he declared out loud, for being alone so much had taught him to speak to himself. Again he added up the figures, this time with more care, and the amount totaled up as it should have. To be absolutely certain, he added them yet again, and again the balance appeared to be correct. "You don't know how close you came to losing your position, Cratchit," he said to the empty outer cell. Scrooge moved the tin cash box off the blotter, unlocked the center drawer, and pulled out a sheath of crisp white collection notes. Flipping through them, he slipped out one in particular. In accordance with their agreement, Scrooge & Marley would take possession of Jonathan Wurdlewart's house and shop if the debt were not paid *in full* by twelve o'clock midnight, Christmas, 1843. Wurdlewart had not wanted to put up his home

as collateral, but Scrooge had insisted, and the baker was so convinced the shop would bring him a quick return that he agreed. Alas, the interest was so high he couldn't keep up with the payments, and now his time was almost gone. Ebenezer Scrooge checked the clock against the bare wall: eleven forty-six. "In fourteen minutes," he said, "it will all be mine." The glittering eyes of his nephew's children and the joyful chime of the city's bells were no more than dreams of what seemed like a long lost past.

As Scrooge calculated the value of the neat cottage and the busy shop, there was a knocking in the outer chamber. Afraid it might be Wurdlewart, come to pay off the loan, Scrooge quickly blew out the lamp. After all, the countinghouse was shut for Christmas Day so how could he accept a payment? In the dreary darkness he sat, cold in his bones, peeking out the shutter. A gaslight flickered on the street, but the steps of his establishment were set in, making it impossible to see who was at the door. The knocking sounded again, and growing edgy, Scrooge arose quietly and crept into the outer cell. If Wurdlewart had the money in hand, he would be forced to settle the account and would not be able to claim the house and shop. Faced with the possibility of such a loss, Scrooge felt miserable.

At the door he heard the sound again, but it seemed to be coming not from the knocker but above the door. Scrooge determined that Pennerpinch had seen his light and gotten angry, and was out there tampering with his sign! Quickly he began freeing the three locks, and in a few moments swung open the door and cried out, "What d'ya think you're doing?" To his surprise there was no one there, or so he thought at first. Through the thick, frozen mist there did seem to be someone, or something, drifting toward him, and as the shape drew closer he saw that it was his deceased partner, Jacob Marley, dragging his long and heavy chain after him.

"Jacob! You assured me I would not be visited again, that I would be saved."

Marley gurgled, "Already you have forgotten your promise, Ebenezer."

"Well, now, Jacob, I must say I had a pleasant time of it today. But Christmas is finished now, and it is time to get back to business."

"The spirit of Christmas must be honored by every man through the long calendar of the year."

"But don't you see that light in Pennerpinch's window? He is

working on Christmas night to gain an advantage over your former partner—I *cannot* allow that.”

“Pennerpinch is forging his own chain, link by link, just as I did. Just as you are doing.”

“Pennerpinch is making a fortune!”

Marley wailed, and Scrooge begged him to calm down.

“This is your last opportunity for salvation,” Marley murmured. “Your last forever and anon.”

“I’ll be hanged before I hand everything I’ve worked for over to that wretch!”

“I am sorry for you, Ebenezer,” Marley hissed, and the hollow voice, along with the wispy substance that was his body, instantly melted like smoke. The chains, too, had evaporated.

The sudden disappearance of his old partner made Scrooge feel apprehensive. “Marley? Where are you? Speak comfort to me, Jacob.”

There was no reply, only the sound of wind gasping in the alley. Now Scrooge spotted a greenish glow sifting out of the mist—rather like the shape of that gruesome, shrouded figure of the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come. Scrooge backed inside and slammed the door shut, but before he could secure any of the locks, the spirit stood before him, pointing his finger of bone at his chest. Terrified, Scrooge fled into the back office and grabbed hold of Marley’s knobbed cane, which he kept in the corner as a warning to charity seekers. Raising the cane as if ready to strike, he waited for the apparition, but there was no movement or sound in the outer cell, and after what seemed a long time, weary, he dropped onto his seat and set the cane across the blotter in front of him. “Humbug!” he snarled.

Reluctant to give anyone or anything a better view of him, and to save oil, Scrooge did not relight the lamp. He simply waited for something to happen. The shadows held their places, however, and feeling less ill at ease, Scrooge proceeded to watch the large black hands of the clock, faintly discernible in the band of gaslight from outside. In three minutes he would acquire the Wurdlewart properties, and the next day would put them on the market for triple their value. All remained quiet and still in the dismal office, while every tick of the clock seemed to be making him richer. At the exact moment of twelve o’clock midnight, Scrooge heard not the stroke of the hour but the clink of a chain—just a breath after the icy iron links yanked brutally tight about his heart.

Bob Cratchit discovered Ebenezer Scrooge the next morning, slumped back against his chair, and exclaimed, "Oh, my God!" After recovering from the shock, the short, skinny clerk pulled a coarse cap over his brittle hair and went to notify the police. Within the hour an officer arrived at the countinghouse, buttoned up in a heavy blue coat and blue vested suit. Cratchit showed him in. Inspector Ignatius Grabbe was a narrow-shouldered man with a wide red mustache and tiny, black, suspicious eyes. As the inspector snooped and sniffed around the chamber and cell for several minutes, the clerk, still shaken, watched in silence, his eyes avoiding the heap of humanity at the desk.

Grabbe, who was rather vain when it came to his powers of deduction, noted out loud that the stiffness of the deceased's skin indicated he had been dead for some hours. "It would appear," the inspector theorized, "that your employer had stopped by his office last night to pick up something important he had forgotten."

"What could he have forgotten, sir?" Cratchit asked, knowing that his master had possessed a powerful memory.

"Well, it could be almost anything," Inspector Grabbe hedged, eyeing the cane in the corner. "How dependent was he on that stick?"

"Oh, that belonged to his partner, Jacob Marley, who is long dead," Cratchit said with a quaver in his throat.

"I see," Grabbe grumbled. "Well, then, perhaps it was for some vital business papers."

"On Christmas night? I should think not."

Annoyed at being foiled, the inspector declared irascibly: "Certainly the deceased did not intend to stop for very long, for he hadn't removed his coat and the ashes in the stove are *quite* cold."

Cratchit refrained from mentioning that Scrooge hated to burn his coal.

Having finally silenced the clerk, Grabbe proceeded with his investigation. He lifted the rusty lid of a small square box on the desk, leafed through a ledger, opened a drawer, flipped through a stack of bills. Then he noticed that the daily calendar was turned to December 26, and that there were no appointments listed. "Hmmm."

Cratchit's eyebrows rose, but his lips remained shut.

Now the inspector looked closely at the latch on the window, which had rusted solid from years of non-use. "Have you keys of your own to these rooms?"

"No one but his own self was permitted to possess keys."

"How did you gain entry this morning, Mr. Cratchit?"

"Upon my arrival the door was unbolted."

Inspector Grabbe looked at Cratchit sadly. "Did you and your employer have . . . harmonious relations?"

Surprised by the directness of the question, the clerk stammered, "Why only yesterday Mr. Scrooge sent a giant turkey to my home for Christmas dinner."

"Would that be the one that had been filling out the window of the poulterer's on the next street?"

"The very bird," Cratchit conceded.

A low whistle emitted from the inspector's lips, and he suddenly did a right-face turn on his heel and moved beside the slumped form of Ebenezer Scrooge, looking over the deceased's head, neck, face. Apparently dissatisfied with his findings, he began reviewing the objects on the desk again. At last he stopped, and put one finger of thought under his chin. The chamber was dense with silence for a few moments.

"Is anything wrong?" Cratchit asked guardedly.

"Not precisely, Mr. Cratchit, but I do find it odd that the cash box is empty."

"Mr. Scrooge would never leave cash in the office. Never."

The conviction with which this statement was delivered did not go unnoticed, and the inspector, taking a deep breath of frustration, suddenly felt compelled to make some display of conclusiveness. "It would appear," he proposed grandly, "it would appear the gentleman known as Ebenezer Scrooge returned to his office to look up his appointment calendar for the following day, suffered an internal malfunction, and expired in his chair."

"Poor, poor Mr. Scrooge," said Cratchit.

Because the clerk had not seemed terribly impressed with the mental process that had led to his deduction, the inspector added, "Of course, there is the lamp to consider."

"The lamp?"

"Either the oil should have all burned out," observed the inspector, "or it should have been lit." At this moment he whipped out the burnt match. "Voila!"

His eyes widening at this new evidence, Cratchit said, "Is it possible a draft had blown it out, sir?"

"Anything is possible," Grabbe admitted, raising one sharp eyebrow doubtfully.

The inspector did an abrupt left-face turn on his heel, and re-

sumed nosing about the premises. But it was clear to Cratchit, who stood hard by in modest silence, that no new evidence was being uncovered. At long last two men wearing white gloves and white faces arrived at Scrooge & Marley. Without a word they loaded the remains of Ebenezer Scrooge onto a wooden plank and carried their leaden cargo, with some unsteadiness, down the front steps. Here the body was dumped into a wooden box supported by four iron wheels with wooden spokes. Along the street the men pushed their earthly burden, as the curious drew closer to learn which of their number had been called to account for his life. The coarse gray shroud flapped grimly in the smoky breeze, and with a distinct smear of disappointment in his tight face, Inspector Ignatius Grabbe joined in the solemn procession.

At the doorway of the countinghouse stood Cratchit, head slightly bowed, in respect. But something caught his eye. Across the way, the pale visage of Gladnought Pennerpinch had appeared in a window, watching the proceedings intensely; and even at that distance, or so it seemed to Cratchit, there was an expression of pleasure discernible upon the wizened face of Scrooge's fiercest competitor.

For all the inspector's deductions, Bob Cratchit had his own theory. When he'd arrived at the countinghouse, as he'd revealed to the police, the door had been left unlocked. What he did not mention was that this was *extremely* unlike his master. Moreover, Scrooge's hand was clenched tightly about Jacob Marley's cane, and lying on the blotter was the collection note on the Jonathan Wurdlewart account. This debt, Cratchit knew, was due on Christmas night; this debt would ruin a man and his family. And most telling of all was the smudge of rust that Cratchit had noticed across the old sinner's chest, as if he'd been struck by a blunt metal object. Cratchit quickly came to some conclusions, and then he did something strange: The clerk unpried Mr. Scrooge's fingers from the cane and stood it in the corner, and placed the Wurdlewart bill in the stove and set it afire. He mixed the new ashes with the old, and left the door of the office ajar a few minutes to clear the scent of smoke. Finally he brushed away the rust on Scrooge's coat. Only then did Cratchit go to the police. But he never mentioned these clues to them, nor to anyone else—not even to Mrs. Cratchit. After the coroner had reviewed the corpse at the London morgue, and following a period of customary bureaucratic procrastination, the incident went down in police records as "Death

by natural causes." When this news reached Cratchit, the humble clerk thought: You're not so smart as you think, Inspector Grabbe.

Upon the death of Jacob Marley seven years hence, the countinghouse of Scrooge & Marley had passed into the hands of Ebenezer Scrooge, although he'd never gotten around to painting over Marley's name on the sign. Now that Scrooge was gone, these assets, considerably greater by 1844, became the lawful property of the only blood survivor the authorities could locate. However, Scrooge's nephew Fred had no talents or interests in this direction, nor any wish to benefit from the misery of others. Not long after his uncle had been laid out and returned to his Maker, the young man visited the bare, chilly abode of Mr. Bob Cratchit and his family. The children were frail and seemed frightened, and one of them, he noticed, leaned on a crutch. Little Mrs. Cratchit, too poor to offer a cup of tea to their guest, said not a word as she sat woodenly on the rough-hewn chair in a black dress washed so often it had turned gray.

The tall young gentleman, holding the brim of his hat with both hands, straight away asked Cratchit: "Would you kindly consider managing Scrooge & Marley on behalf of my family?"

Expressing great surprise—partly because he *was* surprised, and partly because it was good manners—Cratchit said gratefully, nay, heartily: "It would be an honor and a pleasure." That evening everyone in the Cratchit family received an extra spoonful of turkey bone soup.

The first action Bob Cratchit took as manager of Scrooge & Marley was to light a good fire in the office and to heap on the coal. His second action was to write a letter to Jonathan Wurdlewart in which he offered an extension of time and a much more equitable interest rate. Three days later Wurdlewart, looking lean and bewildered, showed up at the countinghouse and inquired cautiously of Cratchit: "Have I understood the terms of your letter correctly?"

"I should think you have."

At which reply Wurdlewart grabbed Cratchit's hand and nearly shook his arm out of its socket. "Thank you so much, kind sir, from me and my family. Thank you so very, very much."

Grinning happily, Cratchit replied, "You're most welcome, I'm sure."

By the following Christmas the baker was free and clear of his debt, and his shop began to prosper. During that period Bob Cratchit and Jonathan Wurdlewart became friends, and several times their families dined together. But not a word about the evi-

dence, or about Cratchit's suspicion, passed between them. Nor did Wurdlewart mention that he had followed Scrooge back to his countinghouse that fateful Christmas night with the idea of appealing to him for more time. After standing out in the dreadful cold awhile, however, Wurdlewart saw through the mist someone who looked thin and short as Cratchit approach and enter the establishment of Scrooge & Marley. But Wurdlewart lost his courage, and so he had wandered back home to seek the comfort of his family. It was only after he heard about Scrooge's death at his desk that he remembered how the old man had viciously belittled Cratchit in front of several people, and Cratchit's fists had clenched in humiliation. So Wurdlewart came to some conclusions of his own, but he never mentioned what he saw that Christmas night—except to his wife, in whom he confided all things.

One autumn evening, when the Cratchits were visiting the Wurdlewarts, Mrs. Wurdlewart, a robust lady famed for her hot toddies, stirred up a great bowl of spirits and kept ladling it into the men's cups. Soon the two husbands were red in the face and sentimental in the heart. Expressing the need for some air, they stepped out onto the moonlit cobblestones and took a walk. In a burst of protective feeling for his friend, Cratchit said to Wurdlewart: "You can be sure of one thing, Jonathan, no matter how long I live, I shall never breathe a word of what I know to another living soul."

Wurdlewart stopped and turned unsteadily toward his friend. "Strange," he said, "I was about to say very much the same thing to you, Bob."

At this time they each revealed their suspicions to one another.

"As God is my witness," said Wurdlewart, "though the thought had passed through my head in a weak moment, I never brought harm to Scrooge. It's not in my nature."

"May God strike me dead if I had anything to do with Mr. Scrooge's demise," declared Cratchit. "It never once entered my mind."

In a flash the two friends knew that the other was speaking the truth. Cratchit realized that the rust he had removed from Scrooge's coat was very likely a marking the old man had acquired when brushing against the rusted lid of the cash box, and Wurdlewart realized that what he had seen that night was probably a configuration of mist, not of man. In the glare of the moon both of their minds continued to wander a few moments: Cratchit thought about Pennerpinch, and Wurdlewart thought about yet another of Scrooge's debtors whom he had heard threaten the

usurer in his office. But in a short time both men dismissed these possibilities as highly improbable, and their minds converged on one idea. At virtually the same moment the two friends had concluded that God, in His infinite wisdom, to satisfy His everlasting desire for justice, and by way of one of His innumerable spiritual agents of mercy, had struck down the old miser.

"God is just," said Cratchit, thinking that Inspector Grabbe had been correct about Scrooge's death after all.

"God is good," said Wurdlewart, thinking that his wife had been correct about Cratchit's innocence after all.

With an arm around each other's shoulder, and much more refreshed, the friends swaggered back toward the house to rejoin the festivities.

Postscript

Under Bob Cratchit's hard-earned experience and thrifty management the establishment of Scrooge & Marley flourished, and within a few years he was able to move his wife and five children out of the mercantile district into a modest yet handsome house (with three fireplaces) far from the sounds of manufacture. Now when the Wurdlewarts appeared at their home, Mrs. Cratchit served crumpets as well as fancy tea, and she became quite a bit more talkative, especially along these lines: "Bob, I'll be needing a new dress to replace this old rag." Tiny Tim, who did not die as foreshadowed by the last of the ghostly triumvirate, grew stronger every day and, finally, threw away his crutch altogether. At the same time he was growing smarter. One day he joined the firm as his father's apprentice. The lad learned quickly, helping to ease the workload on his father considerably. It was not long before Tim was earning a regular wage, and he began expanding the company's services. In time, the Cratchits were able to buy out Scrooge's nephew, who was pleased to be finished with such business entirely. The following week a new sign appeared over the door of the countinghouse—Cratchit & Son—and Tim, who was no longer so tiny, became shrewder and, with every pound won in commerce, hungrier for more and more profit. And so, as Big Tim observed the following Christmas, "God bless us with another client!"

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FICTION

My First Murder



by
**Steve
Barancik**

Come summer I'm the luckiest kid in Pierson County, because my dad's the sheriff. When I get out of school, rather than make me work the fields, he makes me an unofficial sheriff's deputy—even got me an official Unofficial Sheriff's Deputy badge—and I tag along in his squad car and help out around the office while he makes the world safe for the good folk who live here.

Mom doesn't exactly approve, but then again she doesn't wear the gun in the family. In fact, just last week she was saying to Dad that sheriff's work wasn't a healthy thing for me to get too exposed to, said that I'd grow up thinking folks just killed each other all the time. I set her straight on that one. I told her that the greatest number of murderings occurs late in the evenings, early in the mornings, and on weekends. Definitely not all the time. She still wasn't satisfied. She gave Dad her "I told you so" look.

Not that all that much of what a sheriff does involves dead folk and those that make them that way. Most of Dad's work is actually pretty tame stuff, like when somebody's feathered livestock becomes somebody else's feathered livestock, and the first somebody hadn't exactly approved the deal. Not that that's boring or that it isn't important; it takes a good brain to figure out any kind of crime.

And my dad'll tell you that I've helped figure out a few. He says I'm already a little smarter than some of his deputies, and heaps smarter than the others. Still, Dad says he can't put me on the payroll on account of something called "neppertizzum." I think it means that I'm only twelve years old.

But, like I said, I've helped out on a few cases, and even solved some all by myself. The one that's tacked to the front of my brain right now, on account of I'm proudest of it, is the Sampson murder, the first murder I ever solved. You yourself probably wouldn't have figured it out, even my dad didn't, but I'm betting you're plenty smart enough to follow along.

The time was last summer, a Sunday in July to be exact, when the call came in to Headquarters. Someone had been murdered, or was dead with a few holes in him, out at Chief Okeedokee's Wilderness Campground, down by the river. Dad told me to drop what I was doing so that we could race out to the campground and get started while the blood was still wet.

Joe Barton, the owner of the campground (you guessed it: there's

no Chief Okeedokee), met us at the entrance. Dad waved him into the car, and we continued down the dirt road towards the campsites.

"It was Cory Sampson," said Joe. "He and his wife have been camping here since Friday. Nobody saw who did it." Joe paused and then continued, sounding a bit worried. "You don't think there's a maniac still running around in the woods looking to kill someone else, do you?"

"That would be unusual," said Dad, but I don't think Joe took big heaps of comfort from it, seeing as how things were already running a little bit towards the unusual for him that day. Dad's as straight as an arrow, which is why he goes unrun-against at every election. But talking, smiling, and comforting aren't his biggest strengths; his shyness gets in the way. Still, folks like him all the same.

"Any other fusses this weekend?" asked Dad.

"Matter of fact," said Joe, "a couple campers complained yesterday about the Sampsons' playing their rock and roll music too loud. Seems they had some speakers hooked up in the back of their truck to the radio inside. I asked Cory to turn it down, and he just turned it off altogether. No big deal. Hardly seemed like enough for somebody to kill him over."

"Hardly," said Dad.

We were the first unit to the Sampson campsite, but as you can imagine every other camping couple and their kids were already on the scene. Dad groaned. Still, somebody had had the good sense to take a nylon cord and make a ring some ten feet across around the body, and nobody was inside that ring. That was more good sense than you could usually expect from folks. Sometimes they seem about ready to start cutting off souvenirs. Why, once I even saw a guy taking pictures of the wife and kids next to a fresh dead body. Cursed to beat the band when I told him he had the lens cap on.

Before we even got out of the car everyone was at Dad's window trying to make their statement, offering important information like, "Somebody's been killed full of holes," and, "Nobody knows who done did it." Dad searched out Sylvie Sampson, wife of the newly dead man, and offered her the privacy of the squad car, now that we were out of it, which she accepted. Then Dad told everybody else to line up in alphabetic order by last name, and once he'd finished looking at the scene and talking to Sylvie he would take

their statements. Everybody groaned, especially the Wynfeldts, but they all did as told. It's hard to believe when you hear about city folk rushing away from a scene and not wanting to get involved. Small town folk'll take their action and story makings wherever they can get it.

Cory Sampson was dead all right. He was lying face up in a patch of thick weeds and grasses about two feet high. He'd been shot three times from the front. The killer was no dead-eye. One shot'd hit Cory in the thigh, one in the shoulder, one right in the old fuel pump.

Right next to Cory, as clear as if he's lain down in the snow and rolled from his front to his back, was a patch of greenery all matted and flattened by Cory's own personal blood and gore. From this I figured Cory must have rolled halfway over before breathing his last.

There'd been too much "witnessing" around the campsite to figure out where the killer might have done the killing from. Still, there were three exit wounds in Cory's back side, so a search of the area would probably provide some lead leads. We'd need to find at least one of the bullets to figure where the killer stood and what kind of gun he shot.

When another unit showed up, Dad started giving out chores. He told his deputies to keep their eyes pried for a gun, bullets, and anything else that might seem out of place. Like gloves, say. He also radioed for a couple of metal detectors or, if no can do, some rakes. Then he went to the car, offered Sylvie his sorrows and such, and led her away from the crowd for some questions. From the looks of her I'd say she was grieving a good four on a ten scale.

It wasn't my place to sit in on such a sorrowful interview, so I did some investigating around. I asked Joe to point out the folks that had complained about the Sampsons' music, but they didn't look much like the killing type.

I wandered over to the body and noticed something that hadn't been there for the seeing before. In the flattened patch *next* to the body, the patch that was Cory Sampson's face down and second to final resting place, most of the blood had already dried but there were two little pools still plenty wet. Why not three, I wondered, since all the wounds had been bleeders?

Strolling onwards, I came to the Sampson truck. The windows were open, and when I got close, I heard a soft clicking from inside.

I poked my head through the window, careful not to touch anything. The tape deck had been left on. When the tape had done the machine hadn't stopped; it was still trying to click forward. The tape case on the seat was done in a human hand. The group was called "Demon Freshened Borax," and the album was titled *Songs of Death and Parties*. I guessed that the music fell something short of Loretta Lynn. Still, I had what I wanted: an excuse to check in on Dad.

"Dad? Sorry to interrupt. I just wanted to tell you that Mrs. Sampson's tape deck in her car is on. Can I turn it off so her battery doesn't croak?" Right then I realized croaking wasn't a real tasteful subject for the moment, and turned to Mrs. Sampson to apologize as soon as the word had left my mouth. Indeed she'd turned a fine shade of pale. "Sorry, Mrs. Sampson," I said.

Dad told me that his talk with Mrs. Sampson would be over in a couple of seconds and then, turning to her, said she could turn off the tape herself then. But, he added, saying sorry all the way, she'd have to leave the truck and camping gear behind. He promised it would all be given back to her as soon as possible, probably the next day. She nodded. He called a deputy over to drive her home.

Once she'd gone I dragged Dad over to the body to show off my discovery. But the blood had dried all up, and you couldn't see what I'd seen before. I tried to show Dad how the blood was thicker near the two spots I'd seen, but he wasn't much interested.

"The coroner'll be here in a few minutes," he said, humoring me some. "You can tell him what you think you saw. Meanwhile you can sit in while I interview some witnesses."

Dad called the Wynfeldts first, which no one else was too happy about save the Ventons, who figured they'd be next. The Wynfeldts' was the nearest campsite to the Sampsons', and Sylvie'd been there when the shots that killed Cory were heard.

Mrs. Wynfeldt did most of the talking, or at least she did it louder than Mr. Wynfeldt. At around three Sylvie'd come over to their campsite and asked to borrow some matches. Mrs. Wynfeldt sent Mr. Wynfeldt to scare up a spare book, while the two ladies made neighbor talk. When Mr. got back with the book Sylvie and Mrs. continued the conversation, "bringing it toward a decent conclusion" was how Mrs. Wynfeldt put it, when they all heard the three shots loud and near. Mrs. Wynfeldt let Mr. Wynfeldt demonstrate

here. "Bangbangbang," he said. "Just like that." The bangs came all within a second or less they both agreed.

The shots sounded like they'd come from the Sampson campsite, and hardly a moment passed before a worried Sylvie Sampson was running, "like the wind," said Mrs. Wynfeldt, towards her poor husband. Mrs. Wynfeldt shook her head real sad.

"Didn't much matter how fast she run," summed up Mr. Wynfeldt.

The rest of the witnesses had nothing useful to add, but don't try and tell them that. They all agreed that the shots had come rapid and regular, "bangbangbang" as Mr. Wynfeldt put it. No one had seen nor heard anyone running from the scene. By the time we'd given all of them their say it was dark.

Dad checked with his deputies and the coroner to see what they'd found meantime. What they'd found was two bullets; they'd searched like crazy for the third but no go. No gun or gloves, neither. From the bullets they figured the gun was a cheapie, and though they'd work on it it didn't figure to be traceable. As crime scenes go this one wasn't going anywhere.

I wandered around some more while everybody was cleaning up. I looked inside the truck to see if Sylvie had turned the tape off. She had, but that wasn't all she'd done. She'd taken the tape, too. Sylvie must have felt pretty attached to that tape, though I hadn't figured it for mourning music. Still, since my first observation hadn't gotten much of a welcome from Dad, this one I kept to myself.

During the drive home I asked Dad what he thought. He said that since the physical evidence hadn't done a whole lot of pointing, he was going to do some personal prying: dig into Cory's and Sylvie's home life, see if they'd taken out any life insurance recently, see how their relations related, check Cory's business connections and whether he owed anybody. That kind of stuff. "Beating the motive bushes," he called it.

I asked whether he thought it funny at all that Cory seemed to have been killed at probably the only time him and Sylvie had been separated that weekend.

"You mean like maybe she had him killed while she was fully alibied?"

I nodded.

"Yep, it's possible," said Dad. "But it's more likely that whoever

killed him had been waiting in the leafy wings all day for just that moment."

Dad had a point.

The next day didn't shed much extra light on Cory Sampson's sudden decline. The gun wasn't traceable. Not the third bullet nor any other physical evidence was found. The shots were figured to have been shot from the woods, so the get-away'd probably been made by foot, not wheels. No big surprise, since the witnesses hadn't seen nor heard a car leaving the scene.

Friends, family, and neighbors told that the Sampsons had never been the most get-alongingest couple, not even close, but that lately they'd seemed as happy as bugs in rugs. I'm no expert on marriage, but it seemed to me this pointed one small finger towards Sylvie, because I figured if you were planning to kill your husband you'd start acting nice to him so that folks wouldn't think you'd done it. Still, it was just a hunch, not the sort of hard evidence you get to fry someone for.

There had been no new insurance taken out on Cory's life, but the policy he already had wouldn't leave Sylvie washing other people's underthings, if you know what I mean.

Coming home that night I asked Dad what he figured to do next. He stared out over the dark road shaking his head back and forth. "I just don't know," he mumbled. I decided to spend the next day working alone. I had an idea, which was one more than Dad had.

First thing in the morning I hopped on my bike and rode to town, forgetting that the record store doesn't open until ten. Oops. I leaned up against the store. The more I thought about it the more I had Demon Freshened Borax on my brain. Why did Sylvie take the tape? Sure, she might have done it for no reason at all, but it was worth checking out. I don't know what I expected to hear, but it was worth a try.

At ten Mr. Stone showed up and let me in the store, but he had no copies of *Songs of Death and Parties*. "Doesn't sound like little boys' music," said old Mr. Stone.

"It's for my mom," I lied.

Mr. Stone frowned some. "I suppose I could call around for you and see who might have it."

I gave him my best "respect your elders" smile and told him that would be much appreciated.

He finally found a copy for me at The Headbanger's Ballroom, a record store some ten miles away, in the county seat the next county over. Have bike will travel.

"Serious music, man," said the hairy creature behind the counter with the rings in his nose. He seemed to like my choice.

The sticker on the wrapper said, "This album contains lyrics that will offend anybody." "Highbrow music?" I suggested.

"That album'll kill brain cells, man."

I told him how much I was looking forward to that and gave him my money. Then I sped home.

Not ten seconds passed from when I'd put the album on Dad's stereo before Mom shut every door in the house between her and me. I lay back on the couch with the lyrics and tried to follow along. The way they sang it wasn't easy. The first song was titled "Things Me and Sis Do with Knives." The lyrics would turn your dog's face red. The song ends with a scream, sounds like Sis finally stuck the knife in him.

The second song was titled, "Let the Party Begin." Three sounds, real loud with no music behind them, is what they used to set the beat at the beginning. They went like this.

"Bangbangbang."

I called Dad and begged him to pick me up right away. When he came I was waiting with a shovel, garden shears, and a gas-powered leaf blower I'd borrowed from the neighbors. In my pocket I carried a homemade tape I'd made of the three shots on the album, with three minutes of silence going before them. "What's going on?" asked Dad while I loaded everything into the trunk.

"I'm going to show you how Sylvie killed Cory," I answered. "Let's go to Okeedokee's."

Dad looked first at my equipment, then at me like I'd lost a few of the brain cells the record store creature talked about. "He wasn't killed with a leaf blower," said Dad, sarcasticizing.

"Remember the duck rustlers," I said, speaking of the first case I ever solved. "Remember Peeping George?" I gave him my hurt look, which almost always works. "Aren't I an official Unofficial Sheriff's Deputy?" I whined.

"Okay, okay," said Dad. "Let's get going."

I loaded the tape into his car deck and looked at the clock. Three

minutes. I turned up the volume a tad. "I'm playing a tape," I said.

"I don't hear anything," said Dad.

Now you know why he's the sheriff. "You will," I said.

As soon as the shots came I knew I'd turned up the volume a little high. Dad hit the brakes, spun the car, stuffed me under the front seat, and dived out the door with his gun drawn. To say my ears were ringing wouldn't be but half the truth; it was more like someone was playing squeezebox on my brain.

"Uh, Dad," I said, painfully and fearfully. "That was my tape."

God bless him, he didn't even point the gun at me.

Over the rest of the drive I explained, real loud, how I thought Sylvie Sampson had used a tape just like this one to make it seem like Cory'd been shot while she was fussing over at the Wynfeldts. I told him how she'd palmed the tape before leaving the scene, and how the deck had been on when we got there. He thought it was all very interesting, but he said there weren't ways to prove it.

That, I told him, is why we're going to Okeedokee's. I explained I'd have to mess with the crime site some, but he said it was okay since his men were done with it.

Once we got there we took the gardening tools out of the trunk. Dad didn't look like he had a whole lot of faith in me, and, in fact, I wasn't all that sure myself that my hunches'd turn out right.

First thing I did was cut the bloody flat grass patch—the one that was next to where we'd found Cory's body—right down to the ground. While I did I told Dad how my thinking went.

"Do you agree," I asked, "that it looks like Cory rolled himself over, or somebody rolled him over, after he was shot?"

Dad nodded.

"Well," I went on, "I think we can figure he didn't roll himself over. Sure, someone who's just been shot is going to want to get away and get help, and he might not be fit for standing, but I don't think he'd choose crabwalking over crawling. This isn't the county fair. If he landed on his front side he'd want to stay that way and move as best he could."

Dad nodded his head, looking impressed for the first time. He hadn't thought of that. "So what do you think happened?"

"I think Sylvie turned him over."

"Why?"

I didn't answer the question because I'd done with the grass clipping. Yanking the cord I turned on the blower and blew every-

thing away. What was usually orange soil beneath was, as I'd figured, deep blood red all under the body. I picked up the shovel and handed it to Dad.

"What do you want me to do?" he asked.

"Take an inch off the top," I said. "Just an inch, no more, all the way around."

Dad did as he was told. It must be fun having deputies.

"Why am I doing this?" he asked.

"You probably don't remember," I said, "because you didn't take it real serious, but right after we got to the scene I tried to tell you I thought Cory'd been shot only twice before he hit the ground."

"Impossible," said Dad. "Gravity doesn't work that fast. The shots came too quick for him to have got plugged standing up *and* on the ground."

"The tape," I reminded him. "Look, if I show the last plug came while he was on the ground, will you be convinced Sylvie faked the shots everybody heard?"

"Me and a jury," he said.

Dad finished digging, and when I looked down I felt pretty good. At that level the blood had only dripped down in two places, and they matched up just right with the thigh shot and the shoulder shot. Even though the heart wound bled the most. I looked at Dad. "Since Cory was face down here, the blood'd leak direct into the ground, going the deepest straight under the source. Right?"

"Right," Dad admitted.

"Shoulder," I said, pointing to the top spot. "Thigh," pointing to the lower one.

I grabbed the shears and started cutting like crazy in the patch where Cory'd actually been found, facing up. I pictured his chest and aimed for there. Once I'd cut a circle a foot around, I picked up the blower and yanked the starting cord with style. "You are about to see," I yelled, "a .38 caliber hole in the ground."

With a .38 caliber bullet six inches below it, the final proof that the three shots everybody heard weren't the three shots that killed Cory Sampson.

When faced with the evidence, Sylvie wasted no time till confessing. She'd been thinking of killing Cory for months but hadn't been able to figure out how to get away with it. Then one night Cory brought home the new

Demon Freshened Borax album, which she hated, and the second song gave her the idea.

She recorded only the three shots, just like I'd done. Then she bought an unregistered .38 and a silencer, making sure to load it with only three bullets, no more or less. That weekend she waited for a noisy moment to shoot Cory, just to be sure that the silencer was plenty silent. When someone started cutting wood with a chainsaw she had her chance. Coming towards Cory from the woods, she called his name so he'd face her and shot him twice. She wasn't real pleased with her aim, but he went down just the same. Then she rolled him over and gave him the third shot, which she'd saved for insurance, aiming it right at his heart from three feet above. Pleasant dreaming, Cory.

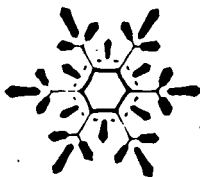
She walked, calmly, down to the riverside to dump the gun, and the gloves she wore case the gun was found. Then she went back to the truck, turned the deck on with the volume on "high," and loaded the tape. She then walked to the Wynfeldts to put her five hundred feet from the scene and socializing when the shots rang out.

Sylvie's mistake was being too careful, trying to ditch the tape after someone, namely me, already had seen it. If not for that she probably would have gotten clean away with the whole thing.

Dad offered me a deal. He'd make sure I got credit for solving the Sampson killing, name in the paper and all that, if I promised not to run against him for sheriff next year. I tried to hold out for an expense account—no go—and eventually I agreed. I think I can wait till I'm fifteen.



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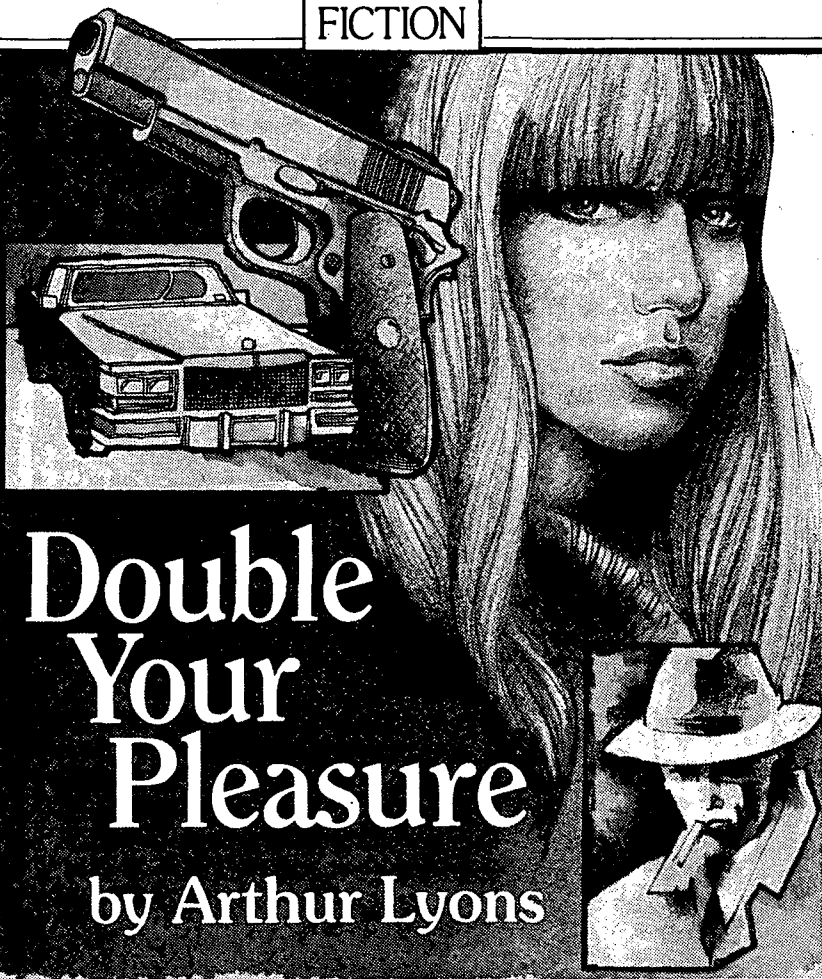
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FICTION



Double Your Pleasure

by Arthur Lyons

“Someone is trying to kill me,” Patricia Ruric said as she handed me a cup of coffee. “I want you to find out who. And why.”

She was in her early twenties, with a long face framed by

dark hair that hung loose on the shoulders of her ivory-colored blouse. She had a narrow, turned-down nose with a prominent bump on the bridge, hazel eyes, and lips that would be perpetually parted to accommodate an enlarged dentition.

She appeared slightly nervous. She sat on the edge of the couch, knees touching and back rigid, and her hands fidgeted with the hem of her gray skirt. Nervous I didn't mind. I just hoped she wasn't crazy. It was an hour round-trip out here from Santa Monica.

I put the coffee cup down on the table and asked: "What makes you think someone is trying to kill you, Miss Ruric?"

She pulled on her right earlobe and her tone grew emotional. "Four nights ago, I was driving home on the Pasadena freeway when a blue Cadillac pulled up alongside me on the right. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed the driver's arm sticking out of the window. That's when I saw the gun. I hit my brakes just as the gun went off. Miraculously, I managed to get over onto the shoulder without hitting anything. All I could do was sit there and shake for twenty minutes." She hugged herself and shivered, as if frightened by the memory.

Freeway shootings. The latest craze of L.A. crazies. The first few media accounts a year ago had set off a rash of copycat incidents, and the hype that followed had whipped up such a wave of hysteria that now anyone whose windshield was hit by a rock kicked up by a passing semi immediately cried that he or she had been the latest vic-

tim of a freeway sniper.

Regardless of the reality of the situation, one thing was certain: People were driving a lot more courteously lately, which just went to show, I suppose, that even hysteria has its functions. "You reported it to the police?"

She looked at me as if I were a dolt. "Of course. The nearest highway patrol office. They said they would investigate, but I got the distinct impression that they weren't going to put a lot of effort into it."

"What made you think that?"

She tugged her earlobe again. "To tell the truth, I'm not sure they believed me. They couldn't find any bullet holes in my car. I couldn't tell them much about the Cadillac, except that it was fairly new—"

"Were there any witnesses?"

She shook her head. "None that stopped, anyway." Her eyes widened. "Then when I told them that the driver was a woman—"

"A woman?" That made me hit *my* brakes and pull over. "You're sure?"

She nodded. "Unless it was a man wearing a blonde wig and red fingernail polish."

A Cadillac-driving freeway she-sniper. Actually, I don't know why I had such a hard time focusing on the image. One thing I've learned in thirty-nine years of living: women are

capable of anything men are. Well, *almost* anything. Which accounts for the differences in public restrooms.

She assessed my expression and said with a hint of irritation: "That's about the same response I got from the officer who made out the report. He seemed to think I was imagining things, or making it all up. He couldn't grasp that this was not a random event."

Before I had a chance to ask her what she meant by that, she excused herself and raised her long, willowy body from the couch. As she walked away, I noticed for the first time that she walked with a slight limp, despite the black corrective shoe on her left foot.

While she was gone, I took the opportunity to look over the living room. It was small, as was the rest of the house, and had seen better days, although none of them had been that great. The once-overstuffed furniture was now understuffed in spots where weight had repeatedly settled, the striped wallpaper was visibly stained, and the carpet would not bear much more traffic. Pasadena had some neighborhoods stuffy with old money, but the street outside was not one of them. It was just old.

She came back in and handed me a newspaper clipping. It was dated three weeks ago and the

headline read MAN FALLS TO DEATH IN LA JOLLA.

The brief account said that the body of Rudy Ruric, 56, of Pasadena, had been discovered early Tuesday morning on Black's Beach. Ruric's car was found later, parked in the lot of the San Diego Glider Airport, on the cliffs above where the body was found. It was assumed by sheriff's investigators that the ill-fated man had stopped there some time Monday evening. "The cliffs in that area are unstable," Sergeant Dick Milstead of the San Diego County Sheriff's Department was quoted as saying. "Mr. Ruric must have stopped there to admire the view, ignored the warning signs, and gotten too close to the edge. There was no evidence of foul play."

I handed back the article and she said, "Rudy Ruric was my father."

"And you think his death and the attempt on your life are tied up in some way?"

"My father was lured up to that spot and murdered," she said flatly. "I checked with the weather bureau. There was a fog in La Jolla that day. Why would he stop to look at fog? At night?"

She had me. "What was he doing in La Jolla, anyway?"

"He went down for Clint Macready's funeral."

"Who's Clint Macready?"

"A multi-millionaire businessman. Dad used to work for him years ago as a grounds-keeper. I was born on his estate in La Jolla, in fact. We used to live in a cottage there."

Her father had gone to a funeral and wound up at his own. The ironies of living. And dying. "How was your father's emotional state lately?"

She jumped at the question. "The detectives from San Diego asked that same question. My father did *not* commit suicide."

"He had no personal or financial problems?"

"No," she said firmly.

"How about enemies? Anyone who hated him enough to want to see him dead?"

She shook her head and her eyes grew teary. "He was the kindest, most gentle man in the world."

"Did he gamble? Owe anyone money?"

"Not that I know of."

"Did anyone benefit financially from his death?"

"There were only the two of us. My mother died a year after we moved from San Diego. Dad left me whatever he had, which wasn't much. This house and a little money. There was a small insurance policy, but most of that was eaten up by the funeral."

I had gone through about all the options, the ones that had to do with reality, anyway. She

hesitated, as if about to say something, then bit her lip. I asked: "What is it?"

"I don't know if it's anything," she said uncertainly, "but your mentioning money made me think of it. I've been going over my father's financial affairs, trying to get things ironed out, and I came across something odd."

"On the fifteenth of every month, for as far back as I could check, two thousand dollars was deposited in Dad's checking account that I couldn't find a source for. At first, I thought it was from the business—Dad owned a small landscape maintenance business—but when I found it hadn't come from there, I did some checking with the bank. I found that the deposits had been transferred into his account at First National through the bank's branch in San Diego. I called there, but all I could find out was that the amount was always deposited in the form of a First National cashier's check." She shot me a glance fraught with significance. "Four days ago was the fifteenth. The deposit wasn't made."

I doubted if it was anything more than a case of synchronicity, a series of acausal coincidences that had assumed an ominous significance in the mind of Patricia Ruric but nowhere else in the universe.

"What do you do for a living, Miss Ruric?"

"I'm a second-year grad student at UCLA," she said. "I'm going for a Ph.D. in clinical psychology."

"Rats in mazes and stuff like that?"

She smiled tightly. "It's a little more than that, but yes."

I said, "My fee is three hundred a day plus expenses, Miss Ruric—"

Her eyes flashed angrily. "I can pay you, if that's what you're worried about. My father left me some money."

I backtracked: "My point is that perhaps you'd be better off using it to complete your education."

Her expression grew pouty. "You don't believe me, either."

"I didn't say that."

"You didn't have to. It was rather obvious." She paused and looked at me searchingly. "What good is an education going to do me if I'm dead?"

Her point was well taken—if the premise it was based on was correct. I didn't really think there was much chance of that. Not that I doubted her sincerity. But this was obviously a bad time in her life. She was young, vulnerable, and suddenly alone, all of which was contributing to her paranoia, and I felt sorry for her. Maybe part of it stemmed from the fact that she was not very attractive

and had a deformed foot; my sympathies seemed to just naturally lie with the underdog.

"Tell you what, Miss Ruric, I'll look into it for a couple of days, and if, at the end of that time, I think your money is being wasted, I'll let you know. Fair enough?"

She smiled. "Fair enough."

"By the way, how did you get my name?"

"Out of the phone book."

That was good enough for me. Almost. "I'll need a retainer," I told her. After all, sentiment went just so far.

The details in the CHP report were pretty much what Patricia Ruric had told me, as was the attitude of the officer who had taken them down. No leads had been turned up since the incident, and without leads, I was told, there was little that could be done. If I happened to turn up anything, I was informed with a polite but condescending smile, the patrol would be more than happy to investigate. Goodbye and good luck.

The gray-green soup of smog that blanketed the city made it a good day to be out of L.A., and by the time I hit the San Diego city limits two and a half hours later, the sky was a crisp and cloudless blue. After putting in another half hour on a hard wood bench in the sheriff's of-

fice downtown, I finally got to speak with Sergeant Dick Milstead, who had investigated the death of Rudy Ruric.

Milstead told me that the time of Ruric's death had been established at between ten P.M. and midnight on the night of the third. The cause of death had been massive internal injuries, presumably the result of the fall. The detective had no idea what Ruric had been doing on the cliffs that night nor did he seem to care, reiterating that they had found no evidence of foul play. Before putting a ribbon on it, they had attempted to trace Ruric's movements in the hours prior to his death. The last place they had been able to put him positively was the Macready funeral, where he had spoken to Macready's daughter, Jocasta. That had been around four in the afternoon, which meant that Ruric had hung around San Diego for at least six hours instead of starting back home. The question was: for what?

I got back on the freeway and pulled off at the La Jolla exit. After a mile, I spotted the sign for the Glider Airport and turned onto a narrow road that wound through a stand of eucalyptus. The road passed through an open gate after which it widened into an expanse of dirt parking lot.

A strong offshore breeze cooled

the sunlight as I stepped out of the car. To the right of the lot, on top of a truncated mud hill, a clump of spectators watched a helmeted man prepare a multicolored hang glider for flight. I walked past the hill to a series of yellow signs that read UNSTABLE CLIFFS—STAY BACK.

The hard mud surface beneath my feet was a mass of deep fissures and caverns where the earth had collapsed, and I felt insecure, as if I were walking on a fragile honeycomb that was ready to slide into the sea at any time. Four steps beyond the signs, it did, in the form of a cliff that dropped five hundred feet straight down to the beach below.

I gazed out at the sea. The view was spectacular in the sunlight, but on a foggy night it would be downright menacing. Why had Ruric come up here that night? Why had he ignored the signs that clearly spelled out danger? I was not likely to find the answers here, so I got in the car and drove back toward town.

The Macready estate occupied a strategic hill overlooking the sea, surrounded by a high brick wall that made the house invisible from the road. The huge iron gates at the foot of the driveway were open and I drove through.

It was immediately apparent why Clint Macready had needed

a live-in gardener. The acres of rolling lawn, the colorful flower beds and manicured hedges, would be enough to keep an army of groundskeepers busy.

The house was on the point of highest ground and looked as if it had been transplanted from some bucolic English countryside. It was a long, two story stone Tudor mansion with leaded glass windows and a roof whose many gables stood erect, like proud monuments to money. I parked behind the fire engine red Ferrari 308GT in the driveway and rang the front doorbell.

A Latino maid in a crisp blue uniform answered the door and I handed her a business card and asked to see Jocasta Macready. She took the card and closed the door in my face and left me to enjoy the beauty of the afternoon before returning and telling me to follow her.

We went through a high-ceilinged, parquet floored entryway, through several oak paneled rooms filled with expensive antiques and old, gilt-framed oil paintings, to a set of gothic-arched glass doors. The doors opened into a conservatory whose glass walls enclosed a swimming pool and jacuzzi.

A young blonde in a yellow bikini stood by an arrangement of patio furniture, toweling off her long, lithe body. She said to the maid: "That's all, Lupe."

She was perhaps twenty-two, and pretty in a severe sort of way, with high cheekbones, a small, pointed chin, and a tiny, retroussé nose that could have been made that way by a surgeon—but he had to have been good. Her eyes were intensely blue. She was very tan except for a large, puckered patch of whitish scar on her right hip. She caught me looking at it and self-consciously wrapped the towel around her waist. "I'm Jocasta Macready," she announced in a haughty tone. "What can I do for you?"

I tried to sound apologetic. "I'm sorry to intrude on your grief, Miss Macready, but I'm looking into the death of a man who used to work for your father. Rudy Ruric. He was at your father's funeral. I believe you told the police you spoke to him there."

She touched her right ear. "I told the detectives everything I know about it." She sounded slightly annoyed. "I only spoke to the man briefly. I barely remember him."

I had never seen her before, but there was something vaguely and disturbingly familiar about her. I stared at her hard. That seemed to make her uncomfortable and she turned away.

"What exactly did he say, do you remember?"

She shrugged. "Just that he

was sorry about my father and that he used to work for him years ago."

"He didn't happen to mention where he was going after the funeral?"

"No," she said, as if the question were absurd.

"That was the only time you had ever seen him?"

"Yes, of course."

"Did your father bank with First National in San Diego, Miss Macready?"

Her expression stiffened. "My father banked with many institutions. Why?"

"Then he did bank with First National?"

"I believe he had an account there, yes." She pulled her right earlobe and asked sharply: "Exactly what do my father's bank accounts have to do with this man Ruric's death?"

"Nothing that I know of," I said, trying to sound innocent.

"Then why are you inquiring about them?"

"It's what I'm paid to do."

She raised an eyebrow. "And exactly who, may I ask, is paying you?"

"Rudy Ruric's daughter."

She nodded. "Well, you can convey my condolences to the girl. At the same time, you can tell her I know nothing about her father's death. Now, if you will excuse me, I have an appointment—"

"One last question," I pressed.

"Do you own a blue Cadillac?"

She stared at me calmly, but there was curiosity in her eyes.

"No. Why?"

"No reason. Thanks again for your time."

I drove down the hill into La Jolla. Nestled in a cove atop a rugged stretch of sandstone bluffs, the town was a tasteful collection of high-priced shops, art galleries, and eateries, all geared to separate, as quickly and painlessly as possible, the tourists that flocked there from their money. I stopped for a late lunch at one of the restaurants that did not have an ocean view included in the menu prices before moseying over to the offices of the local newspaper.

Clint Macready had been sixty-two when he had died after taking an accidental overdose of pain pills and sedatives and drowning in his own bathtub. Macready's physician, Dr. Larry Seabrook, confirmed that he had prescribed the medication, and acknowledged that he had been treating Macready for the past six months for inoperable stomach cancer. The obit went on to say that Macready had made his fortune in timber and textiles, and that he had bequeathed his entire estate, estimated at twenty-one million, to his sole daughter, Jocasta. Macready was a widower, his only wife, Melanie, having died in 1977.

Besides the obit and a brief mention in a couple of articles in the financial section, Macready's name did not appear in the papers much. He seemed to be a man who liked his privacy, a fact confirmed for me by the female clerk at the paper. Jocasta, however, did not seem to mind the limelight one bit.

Several of the half dozen articles in which her name was mentioned were in the society section, a couple of them with pictures—Jocasta Macready with rock star Jimmy McSwain at the gala opening of San Diego's new hot-spot, Rocks; Jocasta Macready, dressed in a skintight leather jumpsuit at the San Diego premiere of the new Sly Stallone flick—but three others had been in the hard news section. In the past four years, the girl had apparently been arrested four times—twice for recklessly driving under the influence, once for disturbing the peace, and once for cocaine possession after a CHP had spotted her standing up in the front seat of her male companion's convertible while driving down the freeway. The drug possession charges had been dropped, but it was apparent that Jocasta liked life in the fast lane. With twenty-one mil, she could buy her own race track.

I stopped at the nearest pay phone and called the L.A. of-

fices of the Circular Index Bureau, a company that deals exclusively in driver's license information, and had the clerk run Alpha checks on Jocasta and Clint Macready, to obtain a list of all vehicles registered to those two in the state over the past three years, as well as a complete driving history for Jocasta. I told the clerk it was an emergency and when I called back half an hour later, she had punched out the information.

Jocasta's only car appeared to be the Ferrari I'd seen in the driveway, but among the seven vehicles registered to Clint Macready was a 1986 blue Cadillac Seville. Surprise, surprise. I wondered if Jocasta could have been driving daddy's car lately.

As I took down her driving history, I marveled silently that her insurance premium must have equaled the annual budgets of several small African nations. Aside from the two drunk driving arrests (both of which had been knocked down to reckless driving), a dozen speeding and other moving violations were listed, as well as two accidents. What caused my attention was something else, however. Jocasta Macready's date of birth was April 10, 1965. There was something vaguely familiar about that date, just as there had been about her face, and I racked my brain, trying to determine what it was. Then,

in a flash, it came to me.

I pulled the CHP report of the sniper attempt on Patricia Ruric out of my attaché case and the date jumped off the page at me—April 10, 1965.

I drove back to San Diego as fast as I could and managed to make it to the County Hall of Records before it closed at five, but barely. After securing copies of both Patricia Ruric's and Jocasta Macready's birth certificates, I checked into the Town and Country on Hotel Circle and went over the documents in my room.

If this was synchronicity, it was the most impressive example of it I had ever heard of. Both Jocasta Macready and Patricia Ruric had been born on the same day at the same address—the Macready house—and had been delivered by the same doctor, William Jafke.

The San Diego phone book had no Dr. William Jafke listed, either in the white or yellow pages, but twenty-two years was a long time. The man could have moved out of town or retired or died. The State Board of Medical Examiners could tell me in the morning if Jafke was still practicing in California and, if so, where. Even if he had died, a blood test would be able to determine lineage. All we had to do was present the court with a compelling enough case to order one.

One vital piece of that case would rest on the cashier's checks that had been deposited in Rudy Ruric's account on the fifteenth of every month. Contrary to popular belief, cashier's checks can be traced and purchasers identified, if one is patient and dogged enough. Tomorrow morning I would put on my spiked collar; in the meantime, I phoned Patricia Ruric in Pasadena.

"Hello?"

"Ms. Ruric? This is Jacob Asch."

She asked anxiously: "You've found out something?"

"I believe so." I hesitated. "You're going to think this question strange, but do you have a scar on your left hip?"

"Why, yes," she replied, stunned. "How in the world did you know about that?"

"Do you know how you got it?"

"A car accident."

"When?"

"When I was a baby."

"Do you remember the accident?"

"No. My father told me about it. Why? What does that have to do with what has been happening?"

It was not the kind of news I wanted to break on the phone. Besides, there were still some details that needed filling in, and I was going to need her help to do that. I told her to come

down to San Diego as soon as possible and bring her father's bank statements for the past six months. I promised to explain everything then.

After showering, I caught the six o'clock news, then went down to the poolside bar for a drink. A Shriners convention was staying at the hotel and the bar was packed with boisterous middle-aged men in maroon fezes, trying their damndest to prove they didn't need hypnosis to regress to the age of ten. In the middle of my second toddy, one of the fraternal brothers dumped his vodka in my lap and I tactfully decided to beat a hasty retreat to the refuge of my room before my temper got the better of me and I wound up a Crusader, battling the forces of Al Malaikam.

The noise from the bar followed me outside and I walked briskly to escape it, but my path was cut off by two of the enemy beating little snare drums hung around their necks. I veered around them and was heading across the parking lot toward my car, figuring to locate a liquor store somewhere nearby, when I heard a car start up behind me and the squeal of tires. I assumed it was just another drunken Shriner, an assumption that was rudely corrected when I saw the grille of the blue Cadillac bearing down on me.

I dived between two parked

cars and skidded painfully along the asphalt on my hands and knees as I heard the gun go "pop-pop-pop"; then the tires squealed again and I jumped up to see the taillights of the car careening out of the lot, heading toward the freeway.

The two drummer boys came running over, and one of them blurted out in amazement, "Jesus Christ, that broad was trying to kill you."

I bent down and closely inspected the trunks of the Audi and the Honda I had wound up between but could find no bullet holes. Nor could I in any of the adjacent cars. Annie Oakley the woman wasn't.

I looked at the bleeding palms of my shaking hands and asked the two Shriners: "Did you get a look at the driver?"

"Young. A blonde," one of them said.

The other nodded in agreement. "Who was she? Your wife? She catch you screwing around, or something?"

I didn't think the question worth answering. "Either of you get a license number?"

Of course neither of them had. I took down their names and room numbers before they had a chance to decide they didn't want to get involved, left them standing there with their snare drums and second thoughts about the hookers they were thinking of importing that

night, and drove as fast as I could up to the Macready estate.

Two miles south of La Jolla, a fog had rolled in, and I cursed self-service gas stations and my own laziness as I squinted through the dirt-streaked mist that smeared my windshield. The fog thickened as I drove into the hills, and I had to slow down to a crawl while my car engine labored up the grade.

After several wrong turns, I managed to locate the street. The gates of the driveway were open when I drove by. I pulled over and killed my engine, then grabbed a flashlight from the glove compartment and started up the driveway on foot. Far below, muffled by the fog, the surf made lonely, sighing sounds against the shore.

I stepped over a low hedge and ran in a crouch up the hill toward the house. The grass was wet and it took only a few yards for the cold dampness to seep through my shoes.

The lights of the house burned gauze-covered rectangles through the fog. There were no cars parked out front. I skirted the house and went around back where the driveway widened into a large open courtyard. On the other side of the courtyard was a long, low structure with four garage doors across its front. A quick tug on each of the handles told me I

was going to have to find another way in. I found it around the side of the building, in the form of an unlocked door. I pushed it open and slipped quietly inside.

The woman's weekly bill for car wax would have kept me eating for a month. The light of my flash bounced off the gleaming paint and chrome of half a dozen cars until it landed on the blue body of the Seville, parked between a Jeep Wagoneer and the Ferrari.

The car was unlocked and I opened the door and looked around inside. The interior was clean and empty. No guns, no empty shell casings, nothing. I closed the door and moved the flash over the car's body. It was spotlessly clean as the others in the garage. I put my hand on the hood. It was cold.

I went back to the door and doused my light before sticking my head out. From behind the door, something cold and hard, like the business end of a gun, pressed against my temple. Jocasta Macready purred: "Step out. Very slowly."

I did as I was told and was instantly blinded by the beam of a flashlight. "Drop your flashlight and put your hands on your head," she ordered.

I did that, too, just to show her what a good job my mother had done raising me. She backed

"What were you doing in my garage?"

Not being able to come up with a plausible lie on such short notice, I said: "You try to kill me and you ask what I'm doing here?"

"Try to kill you? What are you talking about?" The surprise in her voice sounded real.

"Tonight at my hotel. You were driving the blue Cadillac—"

"I have absolutely no idea what you're talking about," she assured me. "I've been home all night. The Cadillac hasn't been out of the garage in a month."

I saw a glimmer of hope. I tried to make my smile look as stupid as I could. "Okay. My mistake. Sorry about the intrusion. I'll just be on my way—"

I started to move off sideways, like a crab, but her icy voice cut through the fog: "You're not going anywhere yet." There was a thoughtful pause. "You know, don't you?"

I continued to try to look like an imbecile. "Know what?"

She said quietly: "My sister."

"Sister? What sister?"

"You know," she said with certainty. "How did you find out?"

When I didn't answer, she said: "Tell me, or I will shoot your kneecap off. And believe me, I'll do it."

I believed her. And since I liked my kneecaps in pairs, I

told her: "There were a lot of things. You're a blonde and the woman who shot at Patricia Ruric was a blonde. The fact that you looked vaguely familiar, yet I couldn't place you. That scar on your hip. Then when I saw you tug on your earlobe—"

"Earlobe?" she remarked, puzzled.

"Identical twins, even if they're raised apart, display a lot of the same mannerisms, particularly when they're under stress. You could change your eye color with contacts and get your nose done and have your teeth worked on, but there would be no reason for you to change your mannerisms." I paused. "When did you find out?"

"That I was a freak? The night before daddy died. He told me all about my Siamese twin sister, about how we were born joined at the hip and how he'd bribed the doctor who did the delivery to keep the fact from my mother. She'd already had two nervous breakdowns. He was afraid the shock of what she had spawned would kill her."

"So he paid off the doctor to falsify the birth records," I said, picking up the ball. "And he paid off Rudy Ruric to give your twin his name and raise her as his own."

"That's right. And as if that

wasn't enough for me to handle, he told me he was changing his will. The knowledge that he was dying changed him. He was going to publicly acknowledge the fact that I was a freak and give away half my inheritance."

I turned my head sideways, trying to make out a shape behind the light. "So you slipped him an overdose of medication before he could consummate his plans and drowned him in his bathtub."

Her voice was soft now, breathy. "I thought that took care of it, but then that gardener showed up at the funeral demanding hush money."

"So you told him to meet you up at the Glider Airport and pushed him off the cliff."

"There wasn't anything else I could do, really," she said, as if there really weren't. "He would have just bled me white. The way I live, I'm going to need all of Daddy's millions. Besides, why should I share something with *her*? I'm the one who had to put up with my sonofabitch father all those years." There was a thoughtful pause. "Does she know about us?" The word "she" was intoned with distinct repugnance.

"Yes," I lied, trying to stall for time while I came up with an angle. "So you see, if you're thinking of doing something stupid, like eliminating me from the picture, too, it would only

compound your problems."

"Shut up," she snarled. I could almost hear her mind working in the darkness beyond the light.

"Slipping an old man a couple of pills is one thing, but shooting people is another," I pressed. "You already proved that when you tried to kill Patricia Ruric in Pasadena, and me tonight—"

She said irritably: "Pasadena? Just what in the hell are you talking about?"

"You tried to ambush Patricia Ruric on the freeway, just like you did me tonight—"

"You're nuts, Asch. I don't know where you're getting all this stuff, but I haven't been to Pasadena in years. And I told you, I haven't left the house all night."

There was no way to tell if she was lying, but she didn't sound as if she were. My mind did some fast reassessment as my mouth said in a purposely unctuous tone, "Why don't we team up. I can help you—"

She cut me off with a sharp, derisive laugh. "You can't even help yourself, Asch. Now turn around and start walking toward the house."

I stared into the light and shook my head. "No."

Her voice grew taut: "What do you mean, no?"

I smiled with all the false bravado I could dredge up. "Once I'm inside your house, I'm an intruder. You can shoot me and

the cops won't do anything about it." I jabbered on: "Give it up, Jocasta. It won't work. You can't just keep killing people—"

"Just do what I tell you, and MOVE!"

I rehearsed it in my mind, trying to get my nerve up. Just run at her and bowl her over. She might have been a horrible shot, but at this range, standing still, she could hardly miss. In all likelihood, I was going to take at least one slug. I just hoped it wasn't in a vital spot and wasn't more than one. I shook my head. "If you're going to shoot me, darlin', it's going to have to be here, because there is no way in hell I'm going to step inside that house."

That seemed to confuse her. "You don't think I'll do it?" she sputtered angrily.

That was okay with me. I wanted her angry. I wanted her livid. I wanted an epileptic seizure, but I'd settle for a hand shaking with rage. "What's the matter? Poor little rich girl used to having her way? Are you going to throw a temper tantrum now?"

"Shut up!" Her voice shrill, sibilant, and I knew I had run out of time.

I charged and the gun exploded deafeningly as I crashed into her, head down. The wind went out of her with a grunt and I heard a gun clatter to the pavement as I fell on top of her.

I grappled with her for a full five seconds before I realized she was not moving. I sat up and looked at my hands. They were wet and sticky. Blood.

I jumped to my feet and frantically searched my body for holes, but found none. My eyes fell on Jocasta Macready's still form. The front of her shirt was soaked with blood where the bullet had exited. I bent down and placed my fingers against her throat, but could get no pulse. Her open eyes stared at me lifelessly.

I heard the footsteps before I saw their owner, and my eyes scanned the ground around the body, looking for the gun. The shoes materialized out of the fog and Patricia Ruric asked with alarmed concern: "Are you all right?"

In the hand at her side, a .38 Baretta automatic dangled loosely. I eyed it cautiously and got up. "Yeah, I'm fine."

She looked down upon the body of her sister and asked fearfully, "Is she—"

"Dead," I finished it for her.

A choked sob came out of her throat and her shoulders sagged. She made a valiant effort to regain her composure and said: "I pulled into the hotel lot as you were pulling out and I followed you. It's a lucky thing I did. She was going to kill you."

I didn't say anything. That seemed to make her nervous.

"I heard what she said about . . . us." Her eyes searched mine for something. Pity, perhaps. "It's true? She was my . . . sister?"

"Yes."

"Then she killed my father and . . . our father. And she tried to kill me?"

"She killed Rudy Ruric and her own father, all right," I confirmed. "But she never tried to kill you."

Her face screwed up in a quizzical look. "What do you mean? If she didn't try to kill me, who did?"

"Nobody," I said. "It was pretty slick. You were running a little experiment in clinical psychology and I was your rat."

She shook her head. "I have no idea what you mean."

I shrugged. "Rudy Ruric wasn't a greedy man. All those years he was content to take the monthly pittance Clint Macready paid him to keep the truth from you. But when Macready died, he saw the chance for more. A lot more. He told you that he was not your real father and the two of you decided to put the squeeze on Jocasta Macready. But Ruric underestimated your sister. He had no idea that she had murdered her father, and he wound up dead himself. With Ruric out of the picture, you saw the chance to have it all, not just half. You had a good idea what

the woman had done because you were her other half—literally.

"You found out the Maccreadys owned a Cadillac and you made up the story about the blonde sniper on the freeway. Then you hired me and put me on the case, knowing that I would uncover the fact of your lineage. To cement things, you rented a blue Cadillac and put on a blonde wig and shot blanks at me in the hotel parking lot, knowing I would come up here."

"I saved your life," she said indignantly.

"Uh-huh. *After* you set me up to be killed. You needed a witness for the justifiable homicide plea. Only, there's one thing I can't understand: why get so tricky about it? She killed her father. A murderer can't inherit. You would've gotten it all anyway."

She stared at me levelly for a moment, then said matter-of-factly: "If your scenario was right—which it isn't—there would always be the possibility they wouldn't have been able to *prove* she killed him. And if that happened, a civil suit contesting the will could have taken years and thousands of dollars in legal fees."

"You really hated her, didn't you?"

Her eyes were two dark, skull-like hollows in the fog. "Hate? The word seems so insipid,

so . . . small. She had everything all those years. Because of this." She held up the foot with the special shoe. "When we were separated at the hip, I wound up with a short leg, so he threw me away like any other defective product. He thought he'd bred a monster."

"He was half-right," I said. "He bred two." I eyed the gun in her hand. "What do you intend to do about me?"

She shrugged nonchalantly. "Pay you. With a handsome bonus, I might add. You did a good job."

"Aren't you afraid I'll tell the police?"

"I'm sure you will," she said confidently. "After all, as you said, that's why you were hired. You'll tell them exactly what you found out, about how I showed up in the nick of time to save your life. That's the truth, isn't it?"

"Not quite," I told her.

She touched her earlobe.

"Anything else is sheer speculation on your part. Let the police try and prove it, but I doubt they will. There have been several excellent psychological studies done on the tenacity and motivation of police detectives. They become easily frustrated with complicated scenarios. I don't think they'll be too anxious to take on this one."

She had it all worked out, right down to the finish. In a way, I had to grudgingly admire the cold elegance of her planning, and I began to wonder if there were a possibility she would get away with it. "You knew just how she thought, didn't you? You knew every move she would make."

"Of course," she said, smiling strangely. "We were the *same person*."

"The same bad blood."

She nodded and the smile turned into a leer. "It does run in families, you know."

FICTION

Homecoming

by Stephen
Wasylyk

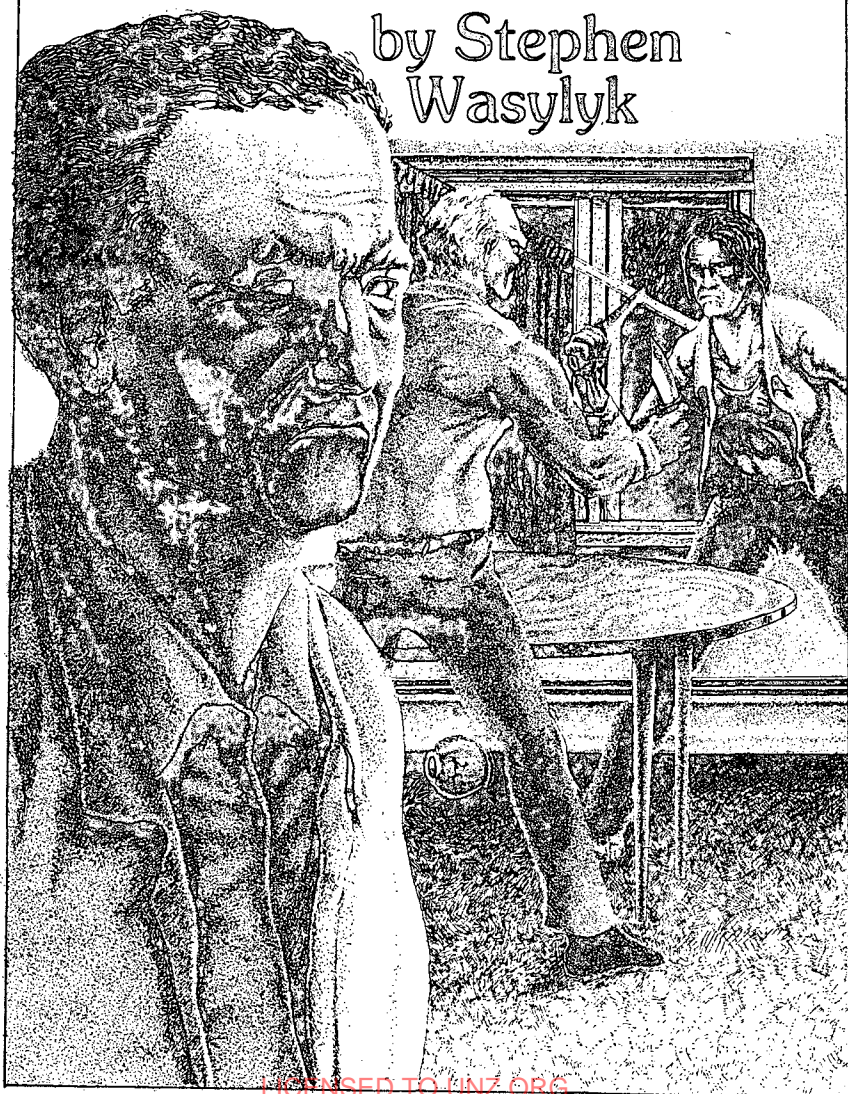


Illustration by Anthony Bari

47
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG

ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Markham stepped from the car and slammed the door with the full fury of six feet of well-muscled frustration.

Time was, if your engine quit for no apparent reason, a little common sense coupled with a few judicious kicks and curses to emphasize man's domination over machinery could get it running again. No longer.

He raised the hood and glared at the tightly packed jumble of boxes, canisters, wires, and hoses. Somewhere in that mass a minuscule wire thinner than a human hair had broken, thereby converting a sleek, shiny, highly overpriced ton of metal and plastic into temporary roadside junk, and absolutely nothing could be done about it until another machine pointed out the flaw.

Fifteen minutes. Fifteen lousy minutes more and he would have been home for the first time in five years.

He had a theory, usually expounded in the NCO club after a half dozen beers, that high tech had invaded Heaven and everyone's life was run by a gigantic celestial computer, which explained why everything was so screwed up, and that his console was in the hands of a dour, wayward angel who got his kicks by pressing the key marked **HARD TIME TO-**

DAY at every opportunity.

He looked up at the low, scudding clouds.

May your circuit board melt into a tiny plastic ball.

The choice between walking in a bitter February wind or staying with the car until someone came along didn't call for the intellect of a Rhodes scholar. This road carried only local traffic and little of it at that. Someone might come along in ten minutes. Or two hours. He might as well walk. He could flag down a passing car on foot as easily as he could by leaping dramatically from his broken-down sedan. The reaction would be the same. Either the driver would stop and smile a good Samaritan smile or glance smugly into the rear view mirror as he sped on his way.

He slammed the hood, the metallic crash reverberating like a gunshot.

He didn't face an enjoyable stroll. The road stretched before and behind him, a narrow blacktop carved into the side of the time-worn Appalachian mountain, trees looming on the uphill side, the other hemmed in by white painted posts and wire cable, the slope below dropping sharply into the valley.

This was hardscrabble country, where people had to fight to make a living. There wasn't

much of anything to see, especially at this time of year. Even in summer, when everything was green, no one would take color photos for picture postcards.

A great many people had asked why, with the whole world to choose from, he'd preferred to come back here now that he'd retired. Markham had a dozen answers, all of which added up to one. This was home.

He zipped his jacket to his throat and started marching, spine straight, shoulders back, arms swinging; his mind picking up the military cadence he'd lived with for thirty years.

I had a good job when I LEFT—

He'd spent time in various parts of the world, but he'd always thought nothing was more desolate and depressing than this forest on a cloudy day in the middle of a snowless winter. The monotonous dirty brown of the leafless trees was emphasized by the clumped green of the conifers; the bare limbs of the older ones twisted and gnarled like bodies which had lived far beyond their time; the wind always a threat and the ominous clouds speaking of death. He knew that many things out there were alive. It just didn't seem that way. And if others spoke of a stark beauty, it had eluded him. It was a time

to be endured and then forgotten when things turned green again.

Like the cold beginning to seep through his jacket.

He rounded a curve. A hundred yards away, a small, shabby house perched in a flat clearing above the road. A rutted driveway angled steeply upward and ended in a yard beside it where a battered black Ford pickup, parked before an unpainted shed, sagged at one corner as if a rear spring was broken.

Opposite the drive, a break in the guard posts opened to a another rutted road that meandered down a steep slope in a giant S to avoid half-buried boulders, ending at a weathered barn with one of its large doors torn from its hinges and a roof pockmarked by holes.

He paused at the entrance to the drive to read the faded letters on a rusted mailbox. KELLY WINSTON.

Since it had been impossible for years to wrench anything more than a bare existence from farming here, this one, like many others in the area, might be abandoned and the house deserted in spite of the pickup. Those who left had a way of moving out and leaving behind everything without sentimental or monetary value, and the truck appeared to have seen its

last summer of usefulness.

But if someone was still there, so was a phone.

He trudged up the driveway.

Paint flaked from the clapboard siding and the half-open screen door leading to the narrow front porch sagged on loose hinges.

The condition of the place and the silence had almost convinced him that he had wasted his time when a woman's scream pierced the cold; a sharp sliver of sound torn from the depths, full of terror and shrill with a vision of imminent death.

Kee-rist! He froze, spine tingling, his blood icier than the February air.

Furniture crashed and male voices shouted curses in the house.

Markham exploded toward the side entrance. Through the scratched plastic of a still-closed, corroded, badly fitting storm door, he could see the nyloned legs of a woman on the floor, her body hidden behind the open inner door as though she had been struck down halfway to safety.

He entered with flat-footed caution, her scream still echoing in his ears. Beyond her, overturned kitchen chairs formed an obstacle course to a dining room doorway that emanated cursing male voices and pounding footsteps. He cat-footed toward it, not really

looking at the scene in the kitchen, but taking it all in peripherally; the woman wearing a flowered dress, her hair gray, a large bloodstain on her chest. And the green of money scattered about the floor, more fanned from an envelope on the table.

He peered cautiously into the dining room.

Two men, their eyes riveted on each other and large knives gleaming in their hands, circled an oval table, leaping forward to slash at each other and retreat again as though performing some sort of ritual death dance. One was young, the other about the age of the dead woman. The young one's eyes flicked to Markham and back to the old man. The old man's back was turned. If he sensed that Markham was there, he couldn't risk a glance away from the razor-edged threat in the young man's hand.

Because of the rockered stripes he'd worn, Markham had broken up many fights in his career, one in particular where two figures in battle fatigues circled a jungle campfire, knives in their hands. He hadn't hesitated then. He didn't hesitate now.

He stepped out and chopped down at the old man's neck with one large hand, felling him like a tree.

The young man scuttled

toward him, eyes afire.

Markham scooped up the old man's knife and remained in a fighter's crouch, the blade moving slowly and menacingly.

"Put the knife down!"

Chest heaving slightly, the young man leaned forward, balanced on the balls of his feet and ready to spring, his arms slightly spread.

"Mind your own damned business. Get out before you get hurt."

Markham took a deep breath. "I didn't deck him so that you could kill him. *PUT—IT—DOWN!*"

The tone of Markham's voice, his size, or the thought that someone younger and faster now held the knife made the young man move back sullenly, still balanced and ready to move if he saw an opening.

In spite of the rattiness of the denim jacket and jeans and the off-key note of the knife, he came across as the All American type people instinctively trust: black hair long and combed, face smooth and boyish, but Markham had seen so many recruits come and go he'd developed an instinct for culling out the ones who would be trouble. There was a glint in this one's eyes that would have put him at the head of the list.

The man on the floor stirred.

Keeping a wary eye on the young one, Markham knelt,

stripped the belt from the older man with one practiced hand, rolled him over, pulled one arm behind him and through the loop of the belt, knelt on it, slipped the other one through the loop and pulled the belt tight. He moved so quickly and expertly that he was finished before it dawned on the young man, passing his knife from hand to hand indecisively, that an opportunity had come and gone.

Markham's final tug brought the old man awake and struggling. He was solid with muscle, his arms heavy. His face was lined, with a scar on one cheek. This wasn't the first knife fight he'd ever been in. Markham wasn't too sure the young one could have taken him.

He clenched a hand in the man's jacket collar, propped him against the wall and rose. The expression on the young one's face was that of a man who realized he had thrown away a winning lottery ticket.

"What the hell's going on here?"

The young man pointed. "He killed her."

The man on the floor stopped wrenching at the belt and stared at him. "You lousy—" He looked up at Markham resentfully. "*Who the hell are you?*"

"Just someone who came in from the cold to find the woman

dead and you two trying to kill each other. Want me to leave and let the kid shove that knife in your belly?"

The old man's face reddened with fury and his eyes bulged as he strained against the belt. "Just turn me loose and I'll carve the little punk into pieces."

"Because of the woman?"

The fury ebbed, leaving the old man's face blank as he looked at the young man. "Yeah, because of her. My wife. He killed her."

"*Bastard!*" The kid leaped. Markham whirled, knife blade menacing. The kid scuttled back.

"Don't try that again," said Markham softly. "You're playing my game and I'm much better at it than you'll ever be." He nudged the old man with his foot. "So she was your wife. Why did he kill her?"

The old man passed his tongue over his lips as though searching for words. "We sold the house and were moving out tomorrow. Our car needed work, so we left it at his garage. He offered to drive us home in his pickup. I guess he knew we had some of the money from the sale on us, and when we got here he scoops up a knife and tells us to hand it over. I wasn't going to stand still for that, so I try to jump him, but my wife gets in the way. He stabs her and

comes after me. I grab another knife or he'd have killed me, too. Then you walk in. Why the hell didn't you hit *him*?"

"Life is one decision after another," said Markham.

"Yeah, well, you blew this one. You hit the wrong man."

The kid's words were as intense as hot coals. "He's trying to con you. It was like he says but it was my mother and me sold the farm and were leaving tomorrow. He's the one who drove us home. He's the one after the money. He's the one who killed her." He pointed with the knife. "You've always been a filthy liar. Someone should have killed you long ago!"

A hundred dollar bill, caught in a draft from the kitchen, skidded across Markham's toes. Caught by the movement, two pairs of eyes fixed on it for a long moment. *Visions of sugar plums danced in their heads*, thought Markham.

He glanced from one to the other. "I would guess you two know each other pretty well."

"He told you I run the garage in town," said the kid. "That's another lie. He does, and there isn't a bigger rip-off artist in the county. He's always looking for an easy buck, but I didn't think he was so greedy he'd kill to get it."

"Look who's talking greedy."

The old man glanced up at Markham. "Check my hands. Go ahead. You'll see I don't work in no garage."

The kid spat. "That's 'cause you get people to work for you for pocket money because you know it's all they can get around here, you cheap, conniving crook."

The back and forth accusations didn't impress Markham. One was definitely lying. The other might be. Individually they didn't worry him, but they were capable of ganging up on him so that they could get back to trying to kill each other. Keeping them under control until the law arrived might be a problem.

He reached around into the kitchen for the wall phone he'd noticed hanging there. There was no dial tone.

"I told you we were leaving tomorrow." There was a smugness in the old man's voice Markham didn't like. "No phone, no electricity in the house. Listen, why don't you let me and the kid settle this? None of your business anyway."

"I might do that," said Markham slowly, "but just so that I know who is who around here, what's your name?"

The old man hesitated, then drawled the words out as though relishing the sound. "Winston. Kelly Winston."

The kid screamed as if the words hurt. "Liar! I'm Kelly Winston!"

"He has to say that," said the old man. "Figures you saw the name on the mailbox."

Markham smiled tightly. "I guess your wallet has some identification to back you up?"

The voice was still smug. "You want to know who I am, you can look. If you think you can do it without the kid jumping you."

He had a point. The kid had already missed one opportunity. He wouldn't let another pass.

Markham looked at the kid. "How about you? Care to show me something that says you're Kelly Winston?"

The kid tossed his knife from one hand to the other, his smile cold.

"I'll show you nothing because this is none of your business. You ain't got no right to interfere. This is between me and that old bastard on the floor."

Markham studied him. "Wrong. The dead woman says it's between you two and the law, so I'll hold him here while you go for the sheriff."

"Are you crazy?" yelled the old man. "He'll never come back!"

"Yeah, sure," said the kid. "I leave you here and you take

off with the money. Think I'm stupid? You want the sheriff, you go."

Markham shrugged. "Fine. This dog and pony show you two are putting on has gone on long enough. I'm backing out of here with the old man and taking the pickup.

"That's even crazier!" yelled the old man. "Do you think he'll stand and watch? He'll have a clear shot at me!"

"He'd better not take it unless he wants to commit suicide. If he does, let it be a comfort to you to know that he'll be dead two seconds after you are."

The old man screamed, "You can't do that!"

"Who will stop me? Him? If he tries, you'll both be dead and the woman will smile down on me from heaven. The way I look at it, I take you in, and if you killed her, the sheriff has you. If you didn't, the sheriff comes for him."

"You think he'll wait for the law?"

"If he's telling the truth he will, but I really don't give a damn. He can't get very far on foot."

"He'll take off with all that money, you fool!"

Always force the enemy to commit himself, Markham.

"Ah, the money again." His voice took on an edge as sharp as the blade in his hand. "Let's

bring down the curtain on this husband-son garbage. You're both more concerned about that money than about a wife or mother lying dead in the kitchen."

The atmosphere in the room was suddenly very cold. The kid's eyes fastened on the old man, his voice contemptuous.

"This is all your fault. If you hadn't been so greedy, we both could have jumped him when he walked in. He'd be dead like the woman and us long gone."

"Take him, Billy!" screamed the old man. "You can do it!"

The kid edged around the table, his eyes on Markham, the point of the knife weaving a small figure eight pattern.

The old man threw himself at Markham's legs. "**GET HIM!**"

Knife extended as though he held a rapier, the kid lunged.

Like a football lineman shedding a block, Markham danced to one side, pivoted, turned the blade aside with his free arm and smashed viciously at the kid's face with a fist made solid by the heavy rosewood handle of the knife.

The kid pitched forward across the old man, smothering a high-pitched curse that ended in a bubbling gurgle as though the old man had something caught in his throat.

A trickle of blood warmed Markham's hand.

He pulled back his jacket sleeve. The kid's knife had scored a slit across the back of his wrist. He'd had worse. Much worse. It was good to know he could still hold his own.

Looking down at them, he wrapped his handkerchief around his wrist tightly. One was as bad as the other. Whoever or whatever they were, he'd sensed from the beginning they had no connection with the woman other than the money and were fighting over the split.

If he had to, he'd guess the young one had killed her. He impressed him as someone to whom killing had come easy and would always come easy because there was something missing inside.

He pulled him off the old man. The old man's surprised eyes were staring at the ceiling. When the kid went down, his knife had ended in the old man's chest.

Markham had the feeling that no one would care one way or another.

He stepped into the kitchen.

Hard years had marked the woman's face, but a stateliness and gentleness and prettiness remained. She'd had many more years ahead, easier years because of the money, years she'd earned and was entitled to and that were taken away because an old man and a young one

considered the money more important than her life.

His lips thinned.

Without bothering to count them, he gathered up the bills and replaced them all in the envelope on the table.

Hearing a groan from the dining room, he found the young man stirring, rapped him across the jaw with the handle of the knife and went outside. He started the pickup, brought it around to the door, went in and picked up the envelope and stuffed it into his jacket.

The young man was still unconscious. Markham carried him out and tossed him into the seat of the pickup.

He positioned the truck at the head of the drive, aimed it at the break in the guard rail that led to the lane on the other side of the road, and climbed out, tossing the envelope with the money into the kid's lap.

You killed for it. See if you can take it with you.

He released the brake and slipped the pickup into gear.

The truck picked up speed as it crossed the road and dipped into the field on the other side, leaving the lane and careening down the slope. One side rode up over a half-buried boulder and the truck flipped and began rolling and bouncing end over end like a child's toy that had been cast aside until it smacked

into the corner of the barn and collapsed it in a cloud of dust.

Markham walked down after it, pulled aside a couple of timbers and looked into the cab at what was left of the kid. The green of the money was scattered like fallen leaves.

He started back up toward the road slowly.

Some of these farms were being bought by people who didn't mind an hour or more of high speed driving on the interstate to get to their jobs. That was the only place the money could have come from, and the old man used that truth as the basis for his lie.

His story could have been true. So could the kid's version.

Markham had no way to know until the old man said he was Kelly Winston. He'd used the name because it was on the mailbox and the quick-witted kid had followed right along. They may have hated each other, but if they could keep him confused, the kid would get the chance to take him out and they could resume their fight.

The mistake they'd made was

assuming he was just someone passing through because someone passing through wouldn't know that Kelly Winston had died thirty-six years ago.

He'd attended the funeral with his father, and if Kelly Winston had returned from the dead, he sure as hell wouldn't have looked anything like either of those two.

At least he'd made an attempt to bring in the law. Too bad that neither was interested, probably because they knew the law could be very hard on people who killed an elderly widow.

So could someone who remembered her as one of the kindest, gentlest, women he'd ever met.

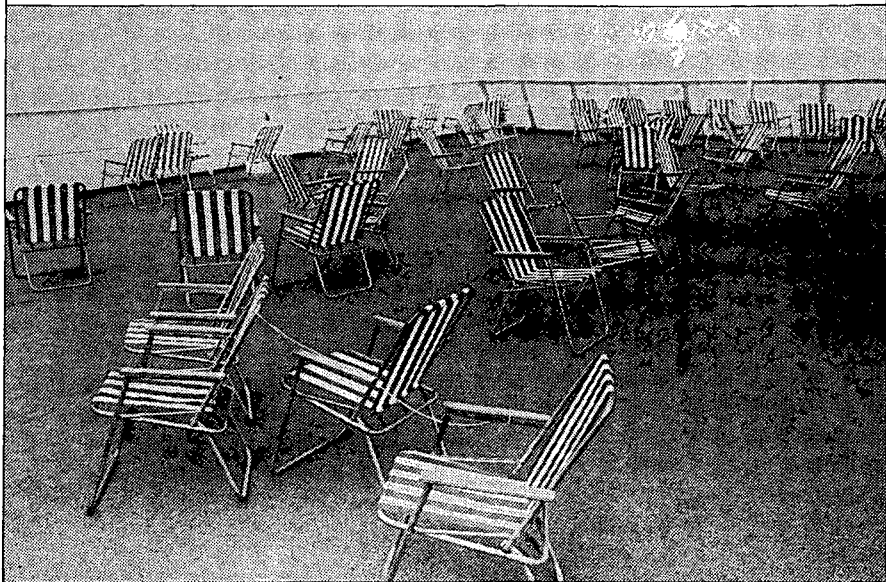
He reached the road and started marching again, spine straight, shoulders back, arms swinging.

It was much colder now, the wind stronger.

He looked up at the scudding clouds resentfully.

*Get away from that keyboard!
You've had enough fun for one day!*

THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



© N. Jay Jaffee

A case of marching orders? We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less—and be sure to include a crime, please), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, New York 10017.

The winning entry for the September Mysterious Photograph will be found on page 155.

FICTION

Screens

by
David Justice



The Archon Corporation had good reason to be concerned about security. The nineteen floors of its corporate headquarters contained the brains and the organization that were giving its high-tech rivals a run for their money. A single front entrance for employees and a loading dock in the rear were both well guarded. In exterior architecture, this windowless box recalled Uncle Scrooge's money bin, and the resemblance did not stop there. The penny-pinching ways of the legendary miser were echoed in the personnel policies of Archon's top management. Considering the volume of sales and royalty arrangements, a surprisingly modest number of workers staffed the hive, spread around sparingly in offices and cubicles, electronically connected. And at all but the very highest levels, salaries were less than what the awed and envious without the walls might expect.

The reasons that employees were willing to put up with this regime were several. There was the challenge and heady atmosphere of Archon, difficult to duplicate anywhere else. There was the hope of future bonanza via the stock-option plan. There was a violently uncertain job market elsewhere in the field. And there was the hint of a threat if they were to attempt to jump over to a smaller but better-paying company. Archon was cash-flush and had an as yet unfed appetite for acquisitions. You could find your new-found place of employment swallowed up by Archon and you would be out on your butt within the afternoon, with no recommendation and nowhere to go.

So most of them stuck it out, not really suffering financially since they were mostly singles, and such workaholics that they had no time to spend what they did make. Only occasionally did anyone incur any overwhelming financial obligations, via bad luck at the gaming tables, the law courts, or the boudoir. Then he could find himself in serious trouble.

For Barbara Martin there was the additional satisfaction of marveling every day at just how far, how fast, she had risen. Risen in literal terms, to the fourteenth floor. An indifferent background, an early marriage and swift divorce did not amount to a bright beginning, but it had fitted her perfectly for the corporate environment. She'd been bruised, and the bruises had calloused over. She had no distractions—she'd been there, she wasn't angling for a man. And now she had her own office, with some of the company's most sensitive records stored in banks of cabinets to which only she and a few top people had access. These were the records that

were too sensitive to be stored in the computer. In a company bursting with hackers, with every other employee a programming whiz, the only safe method was to fall back on the old fashioned expedient of lock and key.

Barbara sat for hours before the display terminal as though pecking at chess with some unseen opponent. Another keystroke, another dollar. Contracts, orders, movement of goods, promotions, new hires, and extinguished careers, all summarized in the dim pinball brilliance of the video screen. She might stare at it for hours, never glancing at the keyboard, for her fingers knew the symbols now by digital instinct, never interrupted by a messenger or fellow worker. Messages to other employees went out over the distributed terminal network, messages to the outside world by modem. In the few, almost clinically distasteful cases where an actual physical letter had to go out, it was dropped, as if one were flushing it, down a vacuum tube.

The aversion to paper extended to the reams of printouts generated daily and quickly obsolete. As soon as was decently possible they would be dumped down the chutes to the basement, where a giant shredder worked full time. Its gleaming spikes resembled an agricultural harrow, these not harvesting wheat, but turning, churning data into dross.

Ross Selden too could boast of an office with a title on the door. Not, it is true, a name on the door; that wasn't the company style. And the fact that it was a private office was not distinctive, since all the cubicles were private, too, and well spaced, lest anyone be distracted from his or her task. No Bigelow on the floor either, since static electricity was a no-no in this environment. And the title would mean nothing to anyone but the personnel manager. No, the rewards of his recent promotion were less visible: a very slightly increased paycheck (the percentage increase determined by formula), and access to more sensitive information, the most concrete possible evidence of trust from the top. He wondered how he stacked up on this score against the rising P-32 Tech Sub across the floor. (What was her name—Martin?) It was actually very difficult to tell.

Ten years earlier, in a more traditional job situation, he might have felt resentful at this uneasy equality with a woman who had worked there a year less than he, but in the present setting it was hard to come up with any such focused emotion. There was something about the office environment that desexed one.

Barbara's screen relapsed into its test pattern. Good time to grab a snack. She pushed the button for coffee break.

The old fashioned coffee break, at a pre-set time which might fall right in the middle of the morning's productivity, when the work force was at its freshest, had been found to be not cost-effective. The employees filing raggedly out of their offices, queuing at the elevators, riding down to the cafeteria where they would fill their heads with distracting gossip, then burn up further transit time as they drifted back to their offices, gave nightmares to the time-and-motion men. So the company had introduced Flexbreak (registered trademark of the Archon Corporation, all rights reserved). With this innovative new idea, announced in a pleased interoffice memo a year before, employees now had the freedom to take their break at a flexible time of the day, whenever a momentary lull in their electronic duties warranted it. A coffee service was sent directly to the office or cubicle by dumbwaiter, courtesy of the company. A menu code at your personal terminal allowed you to customize your order from day to day, selecting either doughnut or yogurt, and choosing freely among the four approved liquid stimulants (coffee, cola, cocoa, and tea). For a slight additional cost, automatically recorded and deducted from the paycheck, one could have a double order of doughnuts, or a doughnut and a yogurt, or an extra yogurt in lieu of coffee, or—the combinatorial possibilities were almost endless.

This arrangement had the additional advantage of sparing employees what was in any event destined to become the increasing boredom and bewilderment of the communal coffee break. The workload had been increased to keep pace with a competitive economy, partitions had been added between previously contiguous desks, distractions such as company softball (with its ominous insurance overhang) had been eliminated. Since one had almost no contact with the other employees, there was really very little to gossip about.

Lunch had been determined to be even less cost-effective, what with employees straggling back groggy after overeating, or late from traffic tie-ups or trying to squeeze in an errand at the bank. Some, moreover, had been in the habit of consuming liquid depressants instead of the approved stimulants. So lunch was sent up by the same method, the employee selecting from a wide range of packaged meals.

Ross was overdue for a break, but his screen showed no signs of

flagging. He kept at it, squinting with ocular irritation and fatigue. Finally his bladder got the upper hand, and he put his machine on hold.

Bathroom breaks had also been determined not to be cost-effective, but in this case no innovations had been introduced. Private lavatories for each cubicle to cut down on transit time and restroom chats had been estimated as even less cost-effective, as had, for other reasons, a policy of everybody holding it until they got home. So there was an *M* room and a *W* room on each level. Private baths and saunas were found only on the top story, where considerations of cost-effectiveness did not apply.

Modular mail-call. *Ffwtt, ffwtt, ffwtt*, the tube in each office disgorged letters into the respective in-box. This was the residue that had not gone over to electronic mail. The company had been unsure what to call this relic, finally settling on "modular" after considering and rejecting "hard-copy" and "analogue."

In a windowed office building, corner offices are at a premium, but they were low on the pole in this sealed vault. In one of these sat Arthur Matrix, brooding up a storm. His last promotion was a distant memory. His next, if it ever came, would come too late to help him in his present fix. He was stuck on the twelfth floor.

He didn't need a new title. At Archon they didn't even get more prestigious but more obscure as you went up, culminating in acronyms like C.E.O. What he needed was cash, and he needed it now.

Paul must be paid, and if Peter must be robbed in the process, Peter had it coming. For Arthur Matrix had not become deadened to resentment. He could program rings around these yo-yos, and here he was only an F-Tech 16.

Over the past month he had perfected a program that would knock their eyes out, just about literally. They'd get what was coming to them, and he would get what was coming to him.

His screen was treading water. Plenty of time for a snack break. As a matter of fact, he seemed over the last month to have fallen into a comparative backwater of the information flow. It was unlike the efficiency experts to let that happen. Maybe they were planning to get rid of him. You never knew. Better to make a killing now and get out.

He pushed the button for his snack. A double serving of doughnuts for Arthur today!

Ross Selden, back at his desk with a sense of having fallen behind, called the accounts program on line and set in working steadily. He would skip break. For the rest of the day, his eyes never left the screen.

Later that afternoon, an event would occur that would cause the residents of the topmost story to stir from their jacuzzis in consternation. But such was the compartmentalized structure of the workplace that no hint of this would filter down the ladder. Countermeasures would be initiated, conferences held, but no one on the lower floors would know of it, not even the one who had set the big ball rolling.

2

The newest hire on the floor was the only one with no background in either business or electronics. The only brush Fischer had had with computers was in the course of his duties as lieutenant during his ten years with the L.A.P.D. For his present assignment, that was a good background but not a good foreground. He ran a small private agency now from which discretion could be assured. The regular police force had an inadequate understanding of the importance of company profits and secrets, and a tendency to get bogged down worrying about infractions of the law.

For present purposes, Fischer was assigned a title of M-7 Sub-Tech and given a cubicle in the middle of the fourteenth floor, the floor on which the unfortunate event had occurred. The transparent plastic walls afforded a good view of all the offices. He didn't even need to go to any great lengths concocting a plausible work setup. No one dropped by to welcome him, no one inquired just what it was he did.

After having worked undercover in milieux where his every move was monitored, where practiced doublecrossers were ever on the lookout against the doublecross, the lack of suspicion here was at first refreshing, then disconcerting. It almost made him giddy the way he could walk the aisles, look in the windows of the office doors, and never attract a stare. There might be a brief glance, but nothing would register, and the glance would go blank again and fade out beneath a furrowed brow glued to the screen.

As near as his professional eye could tell, security was excellent. All employees wore photo I.D. badges. Arrival and departure times were clocked from the card. Guards flanked the single entry door.

You couldn't even use the elevator without slotting in your card. This last precaution was to restrict employees to their own level of information; any transit up or down was automatically logged. There was no record of any transit to the fourteenth floor from any lower level on the day in question. Some niggling regulations on the part of the state, notoriously insensitive to cost-effectiveness, required a fire stairwell, but this was never used and was kept locked between inspections. It looked as though the thief must also be a denizen of the fourteenth floor.

Hunched over his terminal, Ross found his mind wandering and had to keep herding it back like a cowboy punching cattle. He'd been working hard, but was he working well? And if he had been, did anyone know it? Were they considering him for promotion, or for dismissal? Perhaps he had already been dismissed, and continued to receive his paycheck (direct deposit to his account, untouched by human hands) by some computer error. You never knew where you stood in this place. He sometimes had to repress an urge to send a message to the screens on the top floor, obscene or pleading or otherwise attention-getting, but every message you sent went out with your coded signature.

He focused hard on the screen, his vision blurry. He'd had dizziness ever since quitting time yesterday, and now his head throbbed. Did anyone upstairs know he existed? Bracket that, concentrate, do the best job you can.

He would have been shocked to learn that at that very moment he was the centerpiece of discussion by several greying or balding heads. Fischer sat on a sofa taking notes.

"The first possibility," said VP-7, "is that he knows some documents are missing and hasn't informed anyone. In which case, his butt is in serious grease. The second possibility, a special case of the first, is that he swiped the documents himself."

"And then had to physically remove them," Fischer observed. "I notice there are no photocopiers below the fifteenth floor."

"Right, the people can get whatever they need on the screen or off the printer. We don't run a photocopy service for every magazine article or office cartoon these clowns might want to copy. Special requests are made through the clerical pool on floor two. And he obviously couldn't use *them*. As for spiriting them outside, there'd be no problem. Because of our great trust in our employees, we do not examine briefcases or handbags going in or out. Apart from spot checks, and there've been none lately."

"He may be planning to return the originals after copying them outside," Fischer speculated, "before the loss can be discovered. It's to our advantage that he doesn't know that we know."

"It may take him a while to find a copier sophisticated enough to handle the multicolor originals, transparencies, and whatnot," added VP-7. "One that he's allowed to run himself, since Selden is hardly going to hand a sheaf of papers stamped 'Secret' and 'Do Not Copy' to the local While-U-Wait."

"Presuming he took them."

"Well, whoever did. But you're right, the third possibility and the most likely is that he doesn't know they're missing and has nothing to do with it. There would be no reason for him to go combing the entire files on that particular day; he might not notice the loss for a week. We can thank our periodic security sweeps for detecting the loss as quickly as they did. Unless he's planning to hightail it to some sunny beach where we have no extradition treaty, he'd be crazy to rifle his own files."

"So someone entered his office and did it for him," said Fischer, "and our job is to find out who. But the thing that has me stumped is even more basic: *How?* People hardly ever leave their offices. If they do, they're back in a flash. It would take a good twenty minutes even for an expert to pick the locks on the cabinets and page through until he found the most crucial files—and I gather it was only the most crucial and lucrative that were missing."

"That's right," said VP-5, "and it's worse than that, even. Offices are open or unlocked when occupied, but in the secure offices, of which this was one, the door locks automatically when its occupant leaves, whether during working hours or at the end of the day."

Fischer was impressed. "You guys think of everything."

"Everything except *something*. And someone with his own fish to fry has managed to think of that."

VP-13 put in: "The chances are it's someone with a grudge against the company. The guy could get money for those designs and records all right, from any of a number of rival firms or governments, but not really all that much, considering the risk. Mostly it just does us damage."

"He may not have realized what they would fetch on the closed market, as you might call it," said Fischer. "He can't exactly set the buyers against each other in a bidding war. The first one he goes to will know who he is, know what he has, and know that the material is of no use to him whatever unless he sells it. That makes for a buyer's market."

"I hear you, but we don't have any other leads, so we might begin by focusing on whoever has a grudge."

"That could be a lot of people, right?" said Fischer with a grimace.

"Absolutely not!" snapped VP-1. "There is no basis for disaffection with this company. Why, we pamper them like children. It's some misfit, some psychotic."

"Still, not criticizing but just speaking what I see so we can crack this case, I do get a kind of a cold feeling out there on the floors."

"Our climate-control—"

"No," interrupted VP-2 as smoothly as he might, "Mr. Fischer is referring to the sociodynamics. And this has not escaped our attention, in fact. We have been noticing a certain inexplicable falling-off, even and, indeed, especially after a promotion. Despite the ions poured out by the air system, there is frequently a kind of lassitude, as measured by throughput per man-minute. Hence, we are getting ready to implement the Anti-Estrangement Program. It will combine team spirit with a sense of competitiveness. People have been assigned to teams by floor, and at start-up time each morning the screens will flash with an inspirational message of the day. This morning's was: 'Rah, rah, the fighting Fourteenth, powerhouse of floors!'"

"Yeah, uh, that's very nice, but I don't know if that's going to tap any latent team spirit. People don't seem to have much in common around here."

"Nonsense!" cried VP-1. "They all work for the same company, they wear the same clothes, they rifle through the same magazines back at their condos, they share a common culture right down to the last laugh-track of the last TV show!"

"Anyhow," added VP-6, "the program comes with a Solidarity Module, to balance off the stepped-up competitiveness. At two P.M. each day, the audio at each terminal will strike up the company song, with lyrics displayed on the screen. Same lyrics for every floor."

"Okay, okay, I don't want to argue. Who might have a special grievance? Anyone repeatedly passed over for promotion?"

"Not really. Around here they either go up or they go out. Selden himself hasn't moved up in a while, but he's due for another. Was due, rather. He's washed up now, one way or another. Michaels is due for dismissal, but he doesn't know that. Renfrew's going out by the upstairs route: promotion accompanied by a doubled workload he'll never be able to meet. He'll burn out and go bye-bye, but he surely doesn't suspect anything now. Probably bursting with a

sense of new responsibility. Winston's been moving along at a pretty fair clip, and she should keep going. That takes care of the fourteenth floor. You can leaf through the dossiers on the others if you think there's any point."

"What I really need is a personality profile."

"Oh, we wouldn't dream of violating the rights of employees by putting anything of that nature in the files."

"Uh-huh. Plus you none of you has the least idea what any of them are like anyway. If someone causes trouble they're simply out on their ear, right? No, what I need to do is rub elbows with them, listen to gossip, move like a fish in the sea. But the thing is, there's nothing to eavesdrop on. In some ways this is the hardest case I've ever confronted. No excuse to strike up a conversation. If I went into anybody's office, I'd just get an amazed stare."

"That's right, they'd probably report you," chuckled one of the VP's.

"Fraternization robs the company of paid-for worktime," explained VP-2. "We're considering a slogan: 'Fraternization is theft.'"

"Yeah, beautiful. But that's just *it*," said Fischer. "How did the guy get into Selden's office? People just don't drop by around here; and after hours it's locked and wired for alarm. How did he manage to hang around for twenty minutes, just casually passing the time of day and fiddling with the locks on the files?"

From the top to the bottom of the great cube of Archon, machines hummed and scintillated. Bent heads serviced the terminals as if in prayer.

Two P.M. break for the company anthem. From behind a hundred glassed office doors, tinny music could be heard, such as comes from video games. Alone in her office, Barbara sang.

At his terminal, Ross felt increasingly nervous. He felt drained, though it was early afternoon. Something was missing, he couldn't put his finger on it. What was missing seemed to be time.

He had lost time somehow, he must make up for it. He hunched farther forward. The screen was sharp and static. Some new figures were coming up, unfamiliar ones, in a display marked for special importance. He concentrated, screwed up his attention. It was like fighting a wind. He squinted, his heart was pounding, he peered at the scrolling figures as through a film of dust and tears. The screen seemed to be sending off sparks. Suddenly he had to be out of this room.

He grabbed his briefcase and sprinted towards the elevators.

A screen flashed in the highest reaches of headquarters. "R. Selden has left his post and entered fourteenth floor elevators. He has punched for one. Let him proceed?"

VP-7 looked around wildly. Indecisiveness among the other VP's.

"Let him go, but put a tail on him," Fischer said.

"What do you think we are, a police state?"

"Then I'll tail him myself."

Barbara Martin, by contrast, was feeling strangely relaxed. Her screen too was throwing up some novelties, but they were softly intriguing. Something was brewing in product development, but it was difficult to say exactly what. She leaned forward, fascinated. Alphanumeric alternated with prose as the report scrolled slowly at a pre-set speed. This was very, very interesting. What did it all mean? It was interesting, fascinating, soothing, and so clean. Dancing charts and diagrams, lustrous and green. Calculations, captivating, wondrous to be seen. Rhythmically rapturing, scrolling up the screen . . .

Fischer, by the executive express elevator, reached the sidewalk right after Selden and followed him down the city streets in his car after Selden had ducked into his. It was to all appearances a classic and professional case of ditching a tail, with sudden turns, lunges at orange lights, an occasional dash against the traffic signs down a one-way connecting street. And after a while, figuring you were free, a straight, smooth course to the outskirts of the city.

Selden's course again began to waver a bit. His blue Pontiac drew up before an unlikely bar. Selden had never got a good look at Fischer's face, and it looked as though he either hadn't spotted his car, or else he had and had given up and gone someplace innocuous. Either way, Fischer had nothing to lose by following him inside.

When Fischer got back to the office he was hot and exasperated. The two hours spent in a darkened bar, off-hours and in the wrong part of nowhere, watching Selden drink and scanning each entering customer coming in slow as water torture, as though he were a drop contact in a bad spy movie, just didn't bear retelling. After that, Selden, apparently still oblivious to Fischer's presence, had gone to a rundown park and sat on a bench for another half hour.

Again, a classic kind of drop-off spot, but he could swear nothing had been picked up or dropped. Also classic contemplating-suicide behavior, spending half an hour motionless before a body of water; only in this case the water had been a duck pond, choked with weeds and candy wrappers. Selden had then driven to his condo where Fischer gave up.

He headed to the top of the tower and VP-7 beckoned him in. "The switchboard just got a call from Selden," he said excitedly. "Says he felt sick and went straight home."

Fischer frowned and shook his head.

"Ha, a lie!" said VP-1, triumphant. "We've caught the man red-handed."

Fischer was weary. "Yes, red-handed. But red-handed at what?"

Five o'clock. Closing time. He took the employee elevator down to the fourteenth floor to poke around.

Nothing shaking. The floor was quiet, dimly fluorescent. He noticed that Martin was working late.

Fischer went down to Selden's office to poke around. The door had locked, as it should; he opened it with a passkey. There was no sign of anything's having been hastily taken from the office, though a couple of papers had fallen to the floor as though the desk had been left in haste. The screen was stuck on a query, "DO YOU WANT TO CALL UP PATENTS MENU?," beside which a little rectangle flashed patiently on and off, on and off.

He opened the center desk drawer, which was unlocked. Miscellaneous meaningless detritus. And an unopened pack of filter cigarettes. So Selden was a smoker. Not on company premises, certainly; forbidden by the health plan. But a year of worktime smokelessness had not led him to break the habit. Maybe he was under stress. Or maybe he had just taken it up, which meant worse stress.

He checked behind and under anything movable. He couldn't figure it. For lack of anything better to do, he dusted for prints.

When he was done he went back out to the floor and stood rocking on his heels, chewing his lip. Martin's office was still lit up more than the others, like an aquarium tank. He checked his watch. Crikes, it was six thirty. She sure was a go-getter. Maybe women had to work harder to get where they were.

He ambled around desultorily, half observing, half just letting his mind turn. There was no place anyone could hide in this singularly featureless workscape. Rule out entry by outside agent

prior to arrival by guards, hidden until Selden leaves for the bathroom, springing in like a shadow before door can close . . . Jeezer, what was that woman up to? Seven o'clock and she was still staring at the screen. He moved closer to her office. She didn't turn around. He edged right up to the glass door. Her back was to him, hair in a neat bun, expensively tailored ladies' business suit; but terrible posture.

Terrible posture which she maintained unmoving for the space of another minute. It began to dawn on him just how terrible it was. He rapped sharply on the door, waited for a tense second, then barged in.

3

Fischer ground his teeth and unclenched them only to pull at another cigarette. No filter; he wasn't on the health plan. "Can't you get a doctor up here? I've got to know how long she's been dead. And the longer it is, the worse I'm gonna feel."

"The necessary authorities will be called as soon as we have completed our sweep of her hard-files." VP-2 spoke softly and with wordless gestures directed his uniformed crew. "As for time of death, that's elementary. It'll be registered in the terminal."

Fischer swore and threw down his cigarette. "Don't tell me your blasted computer even knows *that!*"

"It doesn't know anything," said the VP calmly. "But the system is interactive, and a complete log is kept of the day's messages. At some point in the log there will be a query from the terminal that isn't answered, and the system will just stay in that rut until interrupted. The times will be printed on the log."

"Let me see that log ASAP," growled Fischer.

"It's being printed now." And the VP was as good as his word, for the next moment a clerk entered with a thick stack. The VP flipped rapidly towards the bottom of the last sheet and announced, "Here it is. Four fifty-five. She stops processing. Let's see the coroner do better than that."

"Strangled," said that sad-faced man when he had arrived and completed his initial observations. "The autopsy will give more details, but I'd say it was quick, without a struggle, and probably with a length of plastic." He motioned to his assistants and they carted the body off.

"It's worse than that," said VP-1, his face dark and almost savage. "Her files were hit. The damage is worse than last time."

"So how do you figure the murder?" VP-2 interjected. "I guess she caught him at it, or what?"

"No, look, I'm telling you, I found her." Fischer spoke thickly, wincing, trying to think his way through this. "She hadn't been grappling with anyone. Her hair, her clothes, the papers on her desk. Nothing had been mussed. She was sitting in that chair like she was part of it. It looked so natural I didn't think anything until I looked long and close. She never knew what hit her." That at least was some consolation. Her death gnawed at him, not because he knew her but because it happened on his shift. True, he'd been out of the building, but it was at his own butt that the buck stopped moving.

"Drugged?" inquired VP-2, arching an eyebrow.

"I doubt it. You'd need a villain in the kitchen, or crouching inside the dumbwaiter. People didn't just go popping into other people's offices around here and have time to slip something in the coffee. And no one knew in advance when anyone else would be taking coffee break, or whether. Well, the autopsy will tell."

The autopsy told. No drugs, no violence apart from the strangulation. She had died as peacefully as if in sleep.

In a funny way, the whole dratted office was not that far from sleeping, all the time—however artificially wakeful and busywork-busy they might be. There was something in this for him if he could just put it all together.

As he'd observed, it was very difficult to get into anyone's office without arousing their suspicion. On the other hand, once you were in there, you could do pretty much what you wanted if the occupant didn't object. People in other offices didn't often come round or look over, since there was nothing to see but someone just like themselves at a terminal just like their own. The workers were few, the offices spaced. Chances were they wouldn't see you, and if they did, they'd assume it was a performance review or a maintenance man.

A maintenance man! You could be one, or dress up like one, and get in relatively easily. She wouldn't even deign to notice you, you could reach right out from behind and strangle her . . .

But even a putative maintenance man couldn't just pick the locks on your files and rummage through their contents without your taking notice.

Unless, that is, he killed her first.

Two problems with that. Selden hadn't been killed, and his files had been rifled. The only way it would work would be if Selden himself had done both burglaries and the murder, and Selden was the one person on this planet with an airtight alibi for the time before five o'clock. The other problem was that Fischer himself had gone by that office at about five past five and no one else had been there. After that, under Fischer's eye, there'd been no motion on the floor. There wasn't time after killing her to do anything but get out of there. The burglary had taken place *first*.

Okay, reason it out. Intruder a fellow worker. What if he were an accomplice? In that case she could have simply given him the key. And then he could have got the right files either before or after killing her because it could be done quickly. But in that case Selden was *also* an accomplice, since it wasn't he who had been there and since the same logical problem applied to the burglary in Selden's office. So now we have a gang of three people, only one of whom gets bumped off, to keep her quiet or to get her share of the proceeds. Which should make the other man, Selden, very nervous about his own well-being. And in fact he had been very nervous, nerves were the plainest explanation of his behavior that day. Unless he had just meant to draw Fischer off the area so that the killing could proceed. Which meant he would somehow have to have penetrated Fischer's very secret, very unobtrusive mission. Unlikely to be by mere observation, so now we have to countenance a penetration at the top, maybe a fourth accomplice. This is looking worse and worse. And what did Martin need this guy for, anyway? She could gut her own files at leisure. He would have to have contacts with a buyer, which she and Selden lacked. The plotting was passing from the baroque to the rococo. And you had to swallow the idea that three, or possibly four or more, plotters were content to split the proceeds that many ways, from an enterprise that had been judged barely worth the risk and effort for one, and with the risks multiplied by the greater difficulty of keeping permanently secret any undertaking involving that many people. And for two of the partakers there was not just the risk but the near certainty of aborting what had been flourishing careers at Archon, for Martin and Selden were both rising stars.

An outside job, then? At this point Fischer would have been willing to suspect the window-washers, only there weren't any windows. And they would need an inside person anyway; no, the

more you reasoned it out the more you wound up with even more plotters and an even more implausible plot.

He had taken a wrong turn. The answer must be much simpler. Somewhere in this building was a lone operator, someone who needed money and who maybe had a score to settle. Fischer looked again at the roster of the fourteenth floor. Renfrew, Michaels. Winston. Defoe. Rolst, who'd been on vacation through all this. McKean and Kenley. That was the lot of them. He would have to interview each one.

Over the next couple of days he was surprised and disgusted at the number of people who professed to be hearing of the killing for the first time, from him. Some said they hadn't even noticed her absence. Normally, such blatant innocence would be evidence of guilt, but in this place the grapevine was so withered that it just might be true.

Management had managed to keep the police away from sensitive areas by saying they suspected the kitchen crew, so the policemen had been kept busy with Spanish and Tagalog interpreters grilling unforthcoming people who had nothing whatever to do with the case. Fischer was getting these employees fresh. But none had noticed anything, none cracked, none showed any signs of anything especially. They seemed drained, bleached, without the spark of spunk to commit anything so original as a crime.

He began to feel a strange and unsettling sympathy for the culprit, mingled with his revulsion at the whole affair. Dangerous, yes; must undoubtedly be brought to justice: but he had challenged the whole structure that made his crime possible and perhaps even necessary. He was like the neurosis an organism develops when it encysts a guilty conscience. He was the system criticizing itself.

Selden he had to interview at his apartment, since he'd been given indefinite compulsory medical leave the day of his flight and the killing. No, he hadn't heard of the killing, he hadn't been out and was letting the newspapers pile up at his door. No, no one had called him. Now that you bring it up, he didn't really have friends at work. He stuck by his story that he'd felt dizzy and ill and had simply left the place. He couldn't remember most of the driving; memory started coming back in when he found himself on the outskirts, he didn't know where exactly. He'd seen the bar and stopped to calm his nerves. He hadn't planned to meet anyone, either there or at the park. What had he been doing with himself

since then? Just moping around; he'd tried to watch television but he couldn't stand looking at the screen. Had he seen a doctor? No: what was there to tell?

He had been instructed not to mention to Selden the fact of the documents' disappearance. If Selden knew of it, whether because he'd taken them or because he'd discovered the loss and not reported it, they didn't want him to know that they knew. And if he was still ignorant, they didn't want the highly prejudicial news of the loss to spread beyond the walls.

Arthur Matrix had not needed a leave of absence. The stage of the process that required his presence for a few days elsewhere had been timed to coincide with the weekend, together with a Friday he'd requested two weeks ago, before any of this began.

As for fleeing to a foreign shore, not a bit of it, at least not yet. He had entanglements here that couldn't be wrapped up so quickly. He needed his next paycheck and then he would be free.

He was back at work on Monday, looking tanned and fit.

Fischer sat alone in his glassed-in office. Having drawn blanks all round, he again abstracted from personalities and focused on the logical problem of the entry and theft. That was what was common to the two incidents. Only one of the burgled had been murdered, and the killing seemed increasingly out of place, off balance. It may have come from an unexpected emergency, or been a slip.

The burglaries had some of the eerie overtones of a locked-room mystery, though in both cases the rooms had been unlocked if occupied, and open to inspection if anyone had happened by. But of course no one ever happened by. That sort of randomness had been programmed out. If anyone did, he'd have to have a darn good story for talking his way past the office door, intruding on the occupant's precious metered time.

It was the people, not the offices, who were locked upon themselves, and the only unobtrusive, unchallenged ways into the offices were the dumbwaiter and the electronic screen. Genies in cups of coffee he reckoned he could rule out. Electronically transmitted messages . . . Just what had Barbara Martin been reading the day she was killed?

He called upstairs for the printout he'd seen the day of the murder, and asked for one to be made for Selden's terminal as well, a

complete record and memory-dump, both for that day and for the day his files had been rifled.

Fischer had logged many hours of tedious casework during his years on the force. He had sat patiently at wiretaps, he had combed the fingerprint archives, he'd done stakeouts in the rain. But nothing had prepared him for the unspeakable tedium, the mind-frying nothingness, of slugging through the transcripts. Numbers followed figures followed letters followed codes, an ugly jumble, signifying nothing he could understand.

Nothing in them stood out or offered any purchase for his attention. Certainly there was nothing on the order of a threat or an offer, no "Coming to your office in ten minutes—give me your files or else," no "Documents needed—Y B poor—Earn \$\$\$ in your spare time."

Just graphs and numbers, abbreviations and codes. It might have been Mayan. Yet he could not let the matter drop.

He didn't know how they fit in, but morally, metaphysically, the screens were at the heart of this case. The way they linked everyone to anyone, yet at the same time cut off, abolished, all genuine human contact, even the contact-at-one-remove of living English prose. They had created the conditions in which the crime had evolved, like sightless salamanders in subterranean caves.

The VP's called him up to report on his progress. He confessed he had nothing definite as yet, and asked for a couple of technical experts to go over the terminal logs.

His report, and the accompanying suggestion of further expensive and time-consuming busywork, was not well received. It was suggested that the fact he was on hourly retainer might be corrupting his methods and spawning makework. It had not been their intention to make him a permanent employee.

In other circumstances Fischer might have told them what they might put where, but this case was gnawing at him. He had to get to the bottom of it. "All right, from now on it's flat fee. You pay me for my time up till now, and nothing more unless I crack the case." To this the VP's assented. They still did not relish his suggestion of assigning two tech men to a probably unproductive fishing expedition, but they took his financial offer as evidence of good faith, and approved the assignment.

The tech men went through the morning part of the three logs

rapidly and with a practiced eye, but spent a long time poring over portions of the afternoons. They left without explanation, taking the logs with them, and returned an hour later with puzzled frowns.

"Parts of these just make no sense at all," said TM-1. "It looks genuine enough until you compare the figures with what is actually in central records, and you find out they were just made up. There never was such a sequence of orders, such product specifications, or such bids."

"Sabotage?" queried Fischer.

TM-1 grimaced. "It doesn't really make sense. Whoever did this went to a lot of effort, not only to write up a very plausible counterfeit but to route the whole thing through the central computer in a way you're not supposed to do—not supposed to be able to do. And to protect his identity he created boxes within boxes of false addresses, cross-referrals, and input codes. Effectively creating a nest of intermediate personalities docketed as responsible for the successive wave of commands."

"So you can't trace him?" Fischer asked.

"Oh, no problem," replied TM-1 with a wave of the hand. "The pseudonymic camouflage is just a delaying action. At the root of it all, he would have to have keyed in with his own code, since everyone's access code is secret, and even if he did somehow find out someone else's code it wouldn't work on his own terminal—security lock. We'll find it, but not until our programmers have managed to unpack all those boxes."

"And what did he get out of all this programmatic filigree?"

"That's just it." TM-1 bit his lip. "Two employees were given some moderately important-looking information that in fact was false, but nothing could really come of it. Just a glitch, a temporary foul-up. If the receivers had tried to react to any of it practically, the attempt would go nowhere, since nothing would check out. So the guy spends about fifty concentrated hours cooking up a plan that would at most waste a couple of hours of other people's time. It doesn't rationalize out."

"So what do you figure?"

"We asked management and they guess some sort of code. They're calling in a cryptologist this afternoon."

"But that makes no sense at all!" exploded Fischer. "The only point of a code would be if Martin and Selden were accomplices of whoever sent those messages. And in that case they could have discussed everything more conveniently in plain English after work. Anyway, I've thought it over and the accomplices angle

doesn't pan out, for several reasons. But if the message-sender was not an accomplice, then what was the point of sending a code the recipients couldn't read?"

A shrug. "Beats me."

Fischer paced and chewed his lip. He was ticked off now and was thinking aloud.

"You know what beats me, finally, is how anyone could actually work in this place, day after day, week after week. Just the ordinary straight stuff they deal with is so close to gibberish in human terms that only another machine could say, 'I couldn't put it down.' What was it like for this Martin woman, who fifty years ago would have been raising kids, to sit day after day alone in front of that screen? At what level of her being did all this reach her?"

He drew up short. There was a thought in there somewhere. Some codes were universal . . .

"Listen, sorry, forget it, but tell me: Could you run that stuff back on the display terminal, just as she would have seen it? Just give me the screwy part and about a three-minute lead-up."

TM-1 shrugged. "As you say."

They ran it through in a reproduction of the original real-time payout. Fischer found himself even more overwhelmed with fatigue looking at it now, on the glowing, faintly flickering VDT, than he had been with the hard text, and he turned his face away. But TM-1 was still intrigued and bothered by the riddle of the bogus messages and was studying them intently.

Let him. Fischer couldn't figure it. He found his mind was a blank. He knew nothing at all about this case, he didn't even know why he was here.

He really had no idea. He mentally pawed through a fog, seeking something substantial.

His name. Yes. He had known that once. It was a nice name really. Let's see . . .

Slowly the fog lifted and he saw it with relief: Fischer. His name was Fischer.

Nice name.

Any other ideas?

Yes, coffee! Good idea. "Let's go get some coffee," he said, to no one in particular. But the only particular person was TM-1, who did not respond.

Fischer dragged his hand through his hair. "Okay, you keep watching it, I'm gonna go get coffee." TM-1 kept staring unvaryingly at the screen.

Fischer, now with an edge to his voice: "Say by the way—hello?—where does a guy go to get coffee around here, I mean if you're just a regular human and you don't have a coded button to push?" No response from the tech man. "I mean with all this hardware around, the one machine you don't have is a coffee machine." He laughed dryly at his proto-joke. His words hung in the air. "I mean, you know what I mean?"

No answer, nothing. What was *with* the people around here? He shook his head to clear the cobwebs and mustered up a hard look at the tech man. The man was staring unblinking as the screen scrolled softly on. New numbers popped up like stardust, shapes shifted dizzily, pulsing, disappearing . . . The whole thing was a lot more mesmerizing than it had read on the page, with interruptions for phone calls and coffee and reading at your own speed. It was as different as ballet was from labanotation. It was . . .

"Hey, snap out of it!" he shouted and gave the tech man's shoulder a shove. The man swayed to the side, then righted himself like a roundbottom toy. Still staring, his mind a void.

"G. D. it, that's *it*, that's *it*!" exclaimed Fischer. "I've got it." With a grim smile, he went over to the wall socket and pulled the plug.

He'd worked with Opticon Associates two years before on another case. Dr. Meade remembered and was glad to rush the tests on the tapes. Fischer waited in a small room adjoining the lab.

"It's as I expected," said Meade, coming through the door. "As you suspected, too, in less technical terms. The Martin tape and the first Selden tape are programmed to hook into the brain's alpha rhythm when played in real time. The literal content is arbitrary—just something to get the complete attention of whoever is watching it. Overlaid on this is an acrostic system of subliminal messages you don't see on the hard copy, since it doesn't exactly match the display-pattern on the screen. And there's an optical-illusion hook-in to Gestalt perception. It's diabolical."

Fischer nodded. "I had a brief foretaste of it myself. The critical faculties are the first to go."

"And then it gets worse," said Meade. "You've heard about those straight country roads planted with regularly spaced poplars, with a spate of inexplicable auto wrecks? Where they found out it was the sunlight winking through the trees, at a steady rate that hooked into the brainwaves, simulating a *petit mal* seizure. Well, the electronic pulse-rate could be similarly timed, in a way that

the intake of hard text cannot—the reader has a lot more freedom. In effect, whoever stared at the first two tape programs went into a kind of trance.”

“And the third one—the one just before Selden bolted?”

“Very different. Nothing for the alpha waves there. You know the sick feeling you get with certain optical designs, moiré patterns? Well, add the dimension of light and motion and you get that feeling squared. No one could look at that tape for more than ten seconds without wanting to lose his lunch. Lord knows what would happen if you felt you had to watch it as part of your job and kept forcing yourself.”

“That explains why Selden was out of it while the sender rifled his files. Also how he was made to bolt before the same guy hit Martin. It conveniently got rid of the one fellow on the floor who might have discovered he’d been burglarized, the one man who might be on the lookout and would not fail to notice and report it if he spotted someone in Martin’s office, the only one who wouldn’t dismiss it without a thought. And he managed to get rid of me at the same time, though he may not have planned that. I don’t think my cover’s been blown.

“But what about Martin? Could she have slipped out of the trance while he was there and he had to ice her?”

“I suppose so. She would actually have been in no condition to recognize anyone, but he wouldn’t have known that,” said Meade. “She’d have been awfully groggy—it wouldn’t have been hard to deal with her in that condition. No doubt that’s what happened.”

“No doubt, no doubt . . .” Fischer closed his eyes and then he groaned as the feeling swept him. He spoke more softly, and his voice had a hollow ring. “And yet somehow I have the feeling he just *did* it. Didn’t plan on it, and didn’t need to do it. I figure she was out the whole time. And it just suddenly got to him how he could do anything he wanted. He’d been an appendage to a computer, a sort of leech on the electronics, and now all of a sudden he was controlling things.

“Hubris. It went to his head. He’d been treading a fine line and now he stepped over it. It was a bad mistake.

“First because he’d had as good a setup as he was going to get. Selden was under suspicion and acting suspiciously. Now Martin would be dragged into it, if he just left her alone. Selden would have had no alibi—the burglary could have been done any time that day, there was no electronic record of what went in and out when for the paper files. The picture would be: another burglary,

Selden flees . . . With the complications and recriminations, he just might have escaped detection, at least long enough to make a clean getaway. And he wouldn't have had me on his tail. Frankly, I've been caring less and less what happens to the files of this company. But when he killed her, he stepped over the line."

Friday came, like the hand of all-healing Time. For Arthur Matrix it was his last day on the job. He had cleaned his desk of the necessary. At three o'clock his paycheck would be ready. At five past three he would be heading out of there. No point worrying about severance pay. He'd already paid it to himself in advance.

But before he left he figured he'd leave a calling card. That nest of pseudonyms would still be in place. He would deposit a salty message somewhere in the middle of the system which would take some time to get bumped up. By the time they read it he'd be gone.

On the nineteenth floor no one spoke while they awaited the results of the unraveling of the murder and message-sender's tangled electronic trail. The solution was imminent. The VP's stared, Fischer smoked.

TM-3 entered with a filing card. "The code at the root of it was M-775-A*5553. That works out to Arthur Matrix. Twelfth floor."

VP-1's face flushed wrathful. "Fischer, take two men and head down there. TM-3, freeze his code."

Arthur sat delightedly finishing his limericks. He hadn't had such fun since he set cats on fire as a boy.

Humming, he keyed up the system and punched in his code to start the process of squirreling his ditties away.

Nothing happened. The screen went blank. Then the message: CODE NOT VALID. What was happening? He'd typed this hundreds of times. He tried again, this time making certain there were no misstrokes. CODE NOT VALID.

Sweat broke from his lip and his hands were clammy. They were onto him. He had to get out of there. A glance at the digital clock told him it was two thirty. He'd have to say goodbye to the paycheck and just lam it.

Outside his office he saw three men coming toward him from the other side of the floor. One unfamiliar guy with a tough-looking mug and two security guards. He tensed for a sprint.

"Block the elevators!" called SG-1, and ran with his companion to block the escape route. Fischer froze.

But Matrix wasn't interested in the elevators. He darted to the fire stairs and disappeared through the door.

"How'd he get in there?" cried the guard in astonishment.

"If you can pick the file cabinets, it's no trick to get through *that* thing. That's how he got up to fourteenth, too. I'm going after him."

"Take the elevator, it's quicker."

Fischer whirled round in a fury. "You take the elevator. This is one I'm gonna handle with my bare hands." And he followed Arthur Matrix through the door.

They'd just assumed they knew which floor he was getting off on, Fischer reflected as he clattered down the stairs after the footsteps. Floor one was the only street-level exit, but who knew what Matrix had up his sleeve? He wasn't going to let this baby out of earshot.

The footfalls clattered and echoed in the stairwell, mingling with the sound of his own footfalls and their echoes, and the echoes of their echo, until it was difficult to judge distance. He kept his speed up, descending steadily. Each level was just like the last one. How many had he traveled? The more he ran, the more nothing changed. He had the sensation of running in place.

Why was he doing this? Fischer reflected. Why this crazy chase? A simple phone call to block both exits, Matrix wouldn't get far.—I know why I'm doing it, I don't want to be just the foxhound that flushes out the fox. The guy's gotten to me personally. I want the collar to be *mine*.

And so he traveled, down, down, in a harmony of footfalls. He felt floating, motionless, as in a dream.

Suddenly a new, sharp sound, slightly dulled by the echo, broke in on the rhythm of footfalls. A door had slammed. Which one? He panicked, increased his pace. But around the next bend he saw that the situation was unambiguous. He had reached the sub-basement, the very end of the line.

Winded, he pulled open the door and stood gasping. It was unlocked—this level the elevator didn't reach. The kitchen and all the lower areas were past the main line. The last remaining human beings in the building, at the bottom, actually used stairs.

He seemed to be in a kind of underground amusement park, with rides that were frightening instead of amusing. The whir and strange smell of generators assaulted him from one side. Inter-current hums of varying intensity disoriented him. Where was Matrix? Was there a tunnel out of here?

A man in pale gray coveralls rode across his line of vision on a hi-lo, glanced at him impassively, disappeared. A woman, stout, hair under something like a nurse's cap, wheeling something, her face washed out in the glaucous lighting, her expression closed. Fischer walked quickly, restraining himself from running, shooting glances down every side walkway through the towering lockers and shelves.

Then he spotted his man.

Matrix too seemed disoriented. Evidently this was not a planned escape route, and he was casting around for an out. Fischer walked towards him at an even pace. Matrix spotted him and broke into a run.

Fischer, having just husbanded his wind, caught up easily with a loping stride. He managed to touch the edge of Matrix's jacket for one electric second before the latter wrenched violently away and crashed into a stack of empty barrels, sending them tumbling behind him. Fischer found his route blocked off. Matrix sprinted away, the second wind of panic fueling him. Fischer waded cursing through the rolling sea.

The course led into an outpocketing, dimly lit. It might or might not be a tunnel. Matrix was in there. Fischer followed.

His man stood a few feet away, facing him. His flesh looked phosphorescent. He had come to a dead end.

"Now just relax, now," said Fischer as evenly as he could over his heaving breaths. "I'm not going to hurt you. I have a pair of handcuffs which you will put on. You have the right to remain silent. You have the right to call a lawyer. You have the right—you have the right—"

But Matrix was backing up with each step of his advancing captor. He looked wild, cornered, a trapped animal.

Then Fischer saw the great sharp blades of the immense shredder, churning away at the wastes of the corporation, at the things that were no longer needed. He cried out. He saw Matrix stumble, his hand flew up to heaven, and then he went into them like grain.

The great cylinders strained, as if they would choke, but pushed through it, and ground on. He watched as what had been a man was ground into the paperwork, blended with the detritus, returned to the original oblivion.

Fischer bowed his head and realized what had happened. "God forgive him," he murmured. "And me."

UNSOLVED

by
Robert Gray

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the February issue.

The instructor at the police training college spoke to the six constables in his class in these words:

"You have been studying full-face photographs of seven criminals whom we are calling P, Q, R, S, T, U, and V. Now I am going to show you one photograph, taken in profile, of each criminal, and you have to write down their names in the order in which I present them."

This was done and the constables handed in the following six answers:

1	P	Q	R	S	T	U	V
2	P	Q	R	U	T	S	V
3	P	S	U	V	R	T	Q
4	P	S	Q	U	R	T	V
5	P	U	R	V	T	S	Q
6	R	P	U	Q	T	S	V

"I am pleased to see that each criminal has been correctly identified by at least one of you," said the instructor. "I note that you all have a different number of correct answers and so I can give out the prizes."

In what order were the photographs presented?

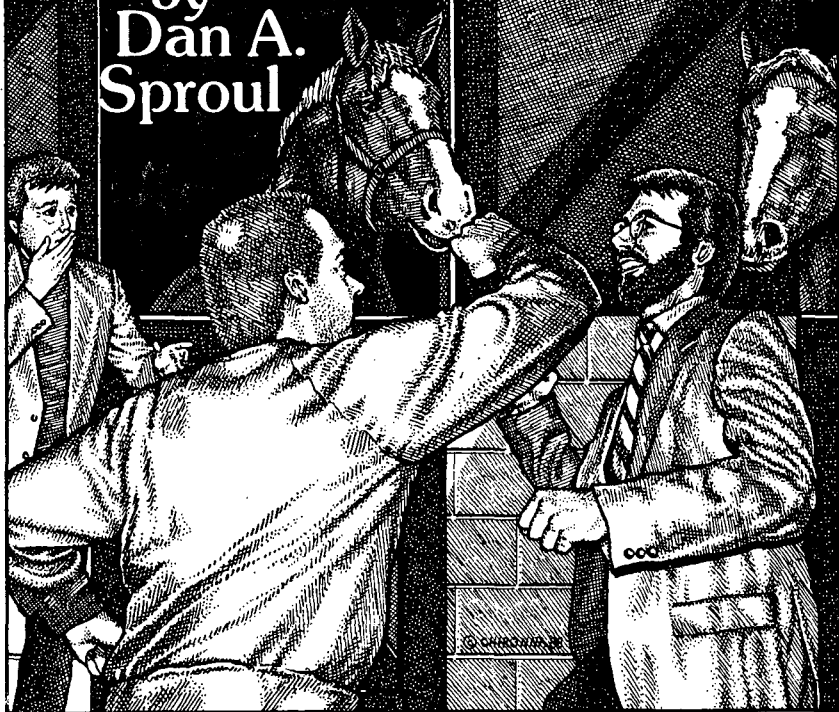
See page 101 for the solution to the Mid-December puzzle.

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FICTION

The Sure Thing

by
Dan A.
Sproul



Some horseplayers don't wear green to the track. They think it's bad luck. They figure the only green you should have on you is money. And a two dollar bill—you got a two dollar bill on you, just go

out and lay down in the cemetery. But you should always bet a misprint in the graded entries and, naturally, you never want to trade in a mispunched ticket, because they never lose—all superstitious bunk.

But boiled cabbage is different. No meat in it, just pure cabbage. Eat nothing but cabbage for three or four days, and just water to drink, no booze, no coffee. Talk about luck, even when you do something wrong it'll turn out right. Oranges work, too, and pears, but not as good as cabbage. Don't make the mistake of eating an occasional pear or orange while on the cabbage diet—pure disaster. I lost two grand once finding that out. This ain't superstition. This is science.

What you eat can make you lucky. It don't matter if you're the best handicapper in the world, you got to have a little luck. It's little things, you start winning those close photos at the wire. None of your winners gets pulled down on fouls, or pulls up lame. Jockeys stop falling off your horse. Your selections no longer go to their knees out of the gate, or doze off in there, or take the scenic route.

I'd been eating boiled cabbage for four days getting ready for Saturday's card. My weight dropped from one eighty-seven down to one seventy-nine. My friend Swinehart (everybody just called him Swine for short) commented on my appearance almost daily. "A group of Nazis keeping you chained up in the basement, or what?" he asked me just the other day. Swine is

a fair handicapper but a moron in some respects. I don't know about Nazis, but there ain't no basements in South Florida. I never divulged to him, or anyone else, my cabbage secret. Such sage wisdom is wasted on the likes of Swine. Swine is one of those people who jerk about with a tiny radio in their shirt pocket and a set of earphones perpetually in place, a noise lover. I never considered the racket bleating out of his earphones as music. It sounds like some guy inside an enormous tin ventilator trying to beat several terrified cats to death with a garbage can lid.

Anyway, for four solid days I'd been infusing my body with luck, with not even a grape or a soda cracker to disrupt the purity. I was getting pretty damn hungry. Just had one more day to go when she came into my little office in the back of the Sunbelt Realty Company and offered me a job. I forgot to tell you. I'm a private detective. STANDARD SECURITY AND INVESTIGATION it reads on the door. My name is Joe Standard so the sign works out pretty good. Most of the security work I get is bouncing drunks at the Cuban dances over in Hialeah, and a little night watchman work at some of the more elite training centers. The detective work I do is searching out over-

lays in the *Racing Form*.

"Are you in charge?" she asked me.

Got to figure this broad is not too quick upstairs. In charge of what? My office is twelve by twelve with one window, a desk, a cot, and a single filing cabinet under a big blowup photograph of Seattle Slew sailing past Cormorant in the Preakness. I repress the urge to tell her my staff of twenty are down the hall crammed in the crapper.

"Uh-huh," I tell her, closing up the *Form*. At this point I get up and push my chair around the desk. "Here, sit down," I offered. Chairs cost money. Never got a lot of foot traffic anyway. I perched on the corner of the desk and stuck out my hand. "The name's Joe Standard. What can I do for you?"

You've heard of a dead fish handshake. This was quicker, just a swipe, kind of like she was teasing a rabid bat.

"Standard... that's really your name. I just thought Standard was the name of the company."

"A common mistake," I informed her, my eyes shifting to her knees.

Her dress looked like dark blue jersey that had been shrunk while she wore it. She quickly, but unsuccessfully stretched the hem to cover her knees, causing her breasts to push dangerously upward and outward from

the plunging neckline of the skimpy outfit. Naturally, I would not think of glomming a peek from my excellent angle of vision. Ha, ha, in your dreams.

Through her dark pair of sunglasses she watched me watch her. After a second or two, she got up and went to the window behind the desk. For a moment she studied the incredible vista of bright Miami sunshine beating down on six overflowing garbage cans in the alley behind Surfer's Bar and Grill. "You will have to excuse the way I'm dressed," she said. "I was at a cocktail party... I hadn't planned on coming here."

"So what can I do for you?" I asked, checking my watch. It was almost five. Kenny, over at the Surfer, would have my bowl of cabbage ready.

She spoke into the window. "The person who recommended you said you knew about race-tracks and that you could... ah, handle yourself—that you used to be a boxer."

"You could say that," I admitted. My boxing career had been short-lived, a Golden Gloves title and six pro fights. Five wins in a row, I lost my last pro fight to Crusher Carlson along with some cartilage in my nose, thirty percent of the hearing in my left ear, and a canine tooth.

She turned from the window

sharply, her long blonde hair whipping about. "Look at this," she said, taking off the sunglasses. Her left eye was purple and swollen shut. And I didn't notice it before, maybe because of the makeup job, or because there was so much else to see, but her lip was puffed out a bit, probably split inside.

"Jeezus, that eye looks bad. You seen a doctor? Eye injuries can be tric—"

"What's your fee?" she cut me off, slapping the dark glasses back on.

That kind of caught me off guard. Nobody ever walked in to hire me before, I mean right off the street like. "Ah . . . that depends. What's the job?"

"I want you to deliver something for me."

"Well, I don't know. I'm not a delivery service. Why don't you just send it U.P.S.?" My stomach was rumbling. Cabbage goes through you pretty fast.

"My husband did this to me," she said. "He's done it before." Her voice broke as she spoke; in anger, frustration, fear, or grief, it was hard to tell. "He drank too much at the party. We argued on the way home. I just can't take it any more. I have to do something."

"Why don't you dump him," I suggested.

"I can't do that. I don't want to do that."

"How 'bout the cops?"

She shook her head. "No. The publicity. My husband is . . . he's rather prominent."

"Really? Who is he?"

"First I have to know if you will take the case," she responded slyly.

"What case? I thought you wanted me to deliver something."

"I want you to deliver a beating. I want you to do to him what he did to me," she explained.

"Let me get this straight. You want me to beat up your husband?"

"Yes, exactly. And I want you to tell him afterwards that if he ever lays a hand on me again, he'll get the same as he gives me."

"Sorry, lady, it's against the law. They call it assault." I wheeled my chair back behind the desk.

But she wasn't done. "Maybe you know of somebody. It's worth five thousand dollars to me . . . in cash . . . in advance."

It only took me a few minutes to get the particulars. Then she handed over a large manila envelope. You can't get fifty one-hundred dollar bills into a regular envelope. It turned out her husband's name was Edgar Walters. He was, of all things, a baby doctor—whatcha call 'em—an obstetrician. Or he had been for a long time. He, along

with four other doctors, co-owned three private hospitals. He was the director of one. And, here's a surprise, he owned a string of racehorses stabled at Hialeah.

According to Edgar's wife, Edgar usually disappeared for five or six days after knocking her around. It would be difficult, she explained, catching Edgar at the office because he had no set work schedule and didn't really spend much time at the hospital. On the other hand, his four thoroughbreds were all with the same trainer, old Oslo Crobett, down in barn fourteen at Hialeah. Edgar visited his string every morning, particularly if one were racing in the afternoon.

After Mrs. Walters left, I grabbed up the phone. Five grand right in my lap. All I had to do was get a hold of Sid, my bookmaker, and see if I could rent his collections man. The phone was dead. The phone bill was a couple weeks past due.

I got Sid on a pay phone. He agreed to have Ironbelly meet me at the Surfer the next morning over my boiled cabbage breakfast. No reason we couldn't go out to the track and get this handled first thing in the morning. Ironbelly wasn't the best man around for the job, but he worked cheap. How tough could a baby doctor be? Guys like

Pattycake Bellini or Ralph the Barge got top dollar, but Ironbelly was getting on in years. Sid told me he gives him a hundred and a half for a broken leg, forty bucks for a finger, eighty for a kneecap, and so on, bargain rates. Ironbelly probably wouldn't charge me more than fifty to bop the guy in the face a couple times.

Until Edgar's wife gave me the five thou to have her hubby worked over, my bankroll had dwindled to about four hundred. So you can see why I hadn't been willing to part with twenty-eight bucks to pay the lousy phone bill. I killed the rest of the afternoon sending a money order to cover the phone after polishing off a huge bowl of you know what at the Surfer. Back in the office I spread out the *Form* and, for the fifteenth time, tore into the ten race card. The five grand was growing warm in my pocket.

The next morning Swine slouched at the end of the bar downing his customary Continental breakfast, a beer mug full of bloody Mary. The thought of anything remotely resembling cabbage gave me a queasy feeling so I decided to skip breakfast. Ironbelly lumbered in just before nine o'clock. "Hey, Standard," he rasped at me with barely functioning alcohol- and smoke-scarred vocal

cords. He eased ever so gently onto the stool alongside. " *&%\$%\$*&%&%! hemorrhoids are killin' me," he disclosed, ordering a boiler-maker from Eddie the bartender.

I tucked my elbow against my body to allow his two hundred fifty plus pounds some bar space next to me. I made the mistake of asking how he was.

"I got *&%\$%\$#%\$&*&%\$ piles. And this *&%\$#%\$% pain in the side, *&%\$*&%\$ doctor says it's a %*\$%\$&%\$ kidney stone. What's the #&%\$*&%\$ *&%\$ job, anyway?"

I took a sip from the large glass of water I was nursing. "I just need a guy roughed up. A couple shots to the face, how much you figure it'll cost me?"

Ironbelly dropped the shot glass, whisky and all, into his mug of beer. "How long's it gonna take to whack this dead-beat #&%\$%\$&%\$#*&%\$#&?"

"We have to drive over to the track at Hialeah. Then I got to find him . . . maybe an hour."

"Fifty bucks. But no screwin' around. Gonna run more than an hour, it'll cost you seventy-five. I got an elbow at two P.M. sharp." Up went the mug to his lips. The shot glass bounced smartly off his bulbous nose as he allowed the last dregs of the booze to rush down his gullet.

Getting into the track backstretch was not a problem. At one time I was an assistant trainer under Buddy Wayne. I paid the fees each year to keep my Florida license up. Most of the security work came from the stable owners. The license allowed me access to them at the track. And sometimes, when the bankroll tapped out, I did some hot walking and stall mucking on the side.

I got me and Ironbelly through the gate and parked my '65 Mustang in the horseman's lot. Ironbelly chugged along behind as I led the way to barn fourteen. When we got to the shed-row, I pulled up quick, motioning Ironbelly to a stop. Oslo Crobett was about seventy years old but keen of eye and ear, and he knew who I was. I didn't want him fingering me as the guy that had one of his owners hammered on.

I didn't see Oslo anywhere around. He was probably still out on the track working his stock. Horses working on the track had until ten o'clock to clear off. So I figured we had about fifteen minutes. Edgar's wife had described Edgar as about six one, with a full beard and rimless glasses. Couldn't be too many geeks around barn fourteen that looked like that.

We waited less than a minute before a guy in a puppy chow

brown suit came up the shed-row from the other way, heading in the general direction of barn fourteen. He had a beard and rimless glasses. "That's got to be the guy," I told Ironbelly. "Remember what I told you to say to him."

"Yeah, yeah, I'll fix the *&#&#&%\$%# deadbeat *&#&#&."*

"Just a couple shots," I told him one last time as he slogged down the path in front of the stalls.

A skinny little fellow pushing a wheelbarrow full of horse droppings struggled down the path before him. Ironbelly kicked the wheelbarrow over as he went by. "Out of my way, manure breath!" he shouted. It was just his way of getting the old adrenalin flowing. He angled off path to catch Edgar midway between the two shed-rows.

"You!" he rasped at Edgar. "I got a message for ya, ya *&#&#&%\$%# dead-beat. I'm gonna rip your #&%\$%*&\$ head off and shove it up your %\$#&*&%\$%#."*

I had overlooked the fact that Ironbelly was intellectually and emotionally depraved. I guess that after leaning on welchers for thirty years, Ironbelly had fallen into a certain routine. In any case, shoving Edgar's head up another part of his anatomy

was not the message he was supposed to deliver. Edgar, as you might suspect, was somewhat surprised.

But not as surprised as I was when Ironbelly sent a smoking roundhouse right at the guy's kisser and missed. It got worse. Ironbelly swung again. Edgar moved deftly aside and laughed. The punch whistled past harmlessly. Ironbelly nearly stumbled and fell with the momentum of the miss. Just about then Edgar brought an upper-cut up from the ground that cracked so loud when it met up with Ironbelly's chin they probably heard it in the track kitchen. Ironbelly came down hard on his hemorrhoids.

Without hesitation, I ran out to the foray. Ironbelly was out colder than a Christmas in Canada. Edgar, with fist still cocked, eyed me suspiciously. "Damn!" I shouted. "Poor Uncle Teddy."

"What the hell's going on?" Edgar wanted to know.

"Oh . . . ah . . . this is my uncle, Theodore Stienbaum," I told him.

Edgar rubbed his knuckles. "What the hell got into him? The crazy old bastard tried to hit me. I don't even know him."

"Yeah, it's . . . it's kind of involved," I stammered, patting Ironbelly on the cheek.

I got Ironbelly by the shoul-

ders and raised him to a sitting position. " *&%\$#&#*&%\$," he moaned, then fell back down.

Edgar began to get a little impatient. "I want to know what's going on here. And I want to know right now."

"Well, like I told you," I explained. "This is my uncle—my Uncle Theodore—we just call him Teddy."

Edgar's nose went a little farther out of joint. "Get to the point. Why did he attack me?"

"Attack you . . . no . . . I mean, he wasn't really attacking you."

"What the hell was he doing then?"

"He wasn't attacking *you*. That is . . . He was attacking your glasses. He, ah . . . he thought you were a Chinese Communist. You know how some Asians wear them funny glasses. Poor Uncle Teddy, he was shellshocked in the Korean war. Every now and then he goes off his nut. You know what I mean?"

Edgar must have bought it. He knelt down beside me. "Let me see what I can do," he said. "I'm a doctor." He felt all around Ironbelly's jaw, then lifted an eyelid for a look-see. "He's okay. Should come around in a few minutes. You say you're his nephew?"

"Yeah, my name is . . . ah . . . Marvin—Marvin Stienberger."

"I thought you said his name was Stienbaum."

"I did? Well, it is. He's my mother's brother. What's all this third degree, anyway? I don't even know who you are."

Edgar stuck his hand out. "Edgar . . . Edgar Walters, glad to meet you. You work back here or what?"

"No, actually I was back here looking for work. I'm a groom."

Edgar stood up and wiped my handshake off on his pants. "Look, maybe I can help you out. I own Trinity Stables. I happen to know my trainer is looking for some stable help."

"You own Trinity Stables?" I repeated stupidly. Trinity Stables had a horse entered in the ninth race. A three-year-old colt called Hitch Your Star. The ninth race was a hundred thousand dollar stakes race at seven furlongs for three-year-olds and up. I'm a twenty dollar better except on my big bet of the day. On my big bet of the day I bet five hundred to win. I liked a horse named Frosty Fred; he was running in the ninth race also.

"You want me to put in a word with my trainer for you?" Edgar asked.

"What?"

"You said you were looking for work."

"No . . . I mean . . . I already found a job. Ah . . . Trinity Sta-

bles. Don't you have a horse entered in the feature today, Hitch Your Star?"

"Yeah, he's a sweetheart, too. He'll make short work of that field they put him in. We worked him Thursday, he breezed three quarters in one eleven. It was an unlisted work, so don't spread it around."

"No, I wouldn't think of it. But he's five to one on the line. The handicappers seem to like Dabbilit. They got him at eight to five with Frosty Fred at three to one."

"Dabbilit's got back problems, they only put him in to fill the race. They won't be trying with him. Frosty Fred, that's rich, only an idiot would bet on him."

"Really. Why's that?"

"Dickie Cannon, the guy that owns him, negotiated a deal to sell him. A breeding syndicate up in New York bought him for a million two yesterday, too late to scratch him. But you can bet your sweet buns they aren't going to chance letting him break down in the race. They brought their own jockey in. He'll run, but they won't extend him for a lousy sixty grand share of the purse."

He was right about the jockey change. That was the only thing that had worried me about Frosty Fred. They took off a top jock for some newcomer I never heard of.

"So you figure Hitch Your Star is gonna laugh all the way around?"

"He can't lose," Edgar confided. "I feel kind of bad about decking your uncle or I wouldn't be telling you all this. Put all you can on him. I don't figure it'll hurt the price much. I'm betting two thousand through the bookmakers plus an additional thousand for Dickie Cannon."

"You mean Cannon's betting against his own horse?"

"I told you. It's the easiest money you'll ever see. But don't spread it around," he warned again.

Ironbelly started making noises like he might be coming around.

"I better get going," Edgar said. "I don't want Uncle Teddy charging me again."

About then Oslo came around the corner of the shedrow leading a horse. Edgar went over to greet him while I frantically tried to get Ironbelly on his feet.

"Hey, Joe, what you doin' back here," Oslo said as he walked past.

Edgar stared at me for a second. "I thought you said your name was Marvin?"

"It's Marvin Joe. Joe's my middle name."

"I didn't know that," Oslo said.

I gave him a stupid smile. "Not many people do. Oslo, can

I talk to you for a minute . . . ah, in private?"

"Got to cool this horse out. You lookin' for a job?"

I walked along side Oslo as he cooled the horse out. "Look, Oslo, I'm doing some under-cover work back here," I told him, making sure Edgar was out of earshot. "I'm using a phony name. From now on my name is Marvin Joe Stienbaum."

"Bill collectors lookin' for ya?"

"Something like that. Just go along with it."

Ironbelly was on his feet and stumbling around when we started back up the shedrow. Edgar still waited by the empty stall door. I got Ironbelly by the arm to steady him.

"*&%\$#&#&*&%\$ dead-beat, he sucker punched me," Ironbelly groaned, holding his face. I slipped him a hundred dollar bill and told him to wait in the car. Oslo and Edgar stood watching as he shuffled off mumbling.

"Oh, Marvin Joe," Oslo called out. "Did you meet Mr. Walters?" I got no chance to answer before he turned to Edgar. "Marvin Joe worked for me a couple times," he told Edgar, flashing me a cheesy grin. "Marvin Joe Stienbaum, this is Edgar Walters."

"No, you're wrong," Edgar told him.

"I am?" said Oslo.

"His name is Stienberger. You're confusing him with his uncle. His uncle's name is Stienbaum."

Oslo looked at me. "Is that right?"

"Yeah, I'm Stienberger."

Old Oslo, obviously enjoying himself, shot me another grin, then looked Edgar straight in the eye. "Hmmm . . . must of been his uncle that worked for me."

I wheeled the Mustang out of the stable entrance on to Palm Avenue. Ironbelly insisted on stopping at the nearest bar so he could phone a hit man in New Jersey to take out the *&%\$#&#&*&%\$ #&%\$ that sucker punched him. He got a beefy paw twisted up in my best button-down. "I want a name!" he roared in my ear.

"Theodore Stienbaum," I offered. With that he was out of the car, jogging down the street, shirt-tail whipping in the wind.

The situation had become a bit awkward. But there are business ethics, even in the gumshoe business. I would either have to whack her old man or give the five grand back to Mrs. Walters, less expenses. It occurred to me that there was something more to consider here; namely, there was Hitch Your Star.

I started running bets at the track, getting down my own action, before I turned fifteen.

That was twenty years ago. In all those years I've had some good bets. Horses so strong they could have fallen down, got up, and won anyway. But never, not once, in all those years did I ever have a sure thing. Not until now.

It had to be the cabbage working. Not only did I have a sure thing but with five thousand in my pocket I had the means to cash in big enough to forget about forkin' horse poop for several years. You figure it out. If Hitch Your Star goes off at five to one, and there is no reason why he shouldn't with two world beaters in there with him which don't figure to run an inch, then each two bucks bet will return at least twelve bucks. Twelve times two thousand five hundred—yeah, that's right—thirty thousand.

The more I thought about it, the more I began to feel a little guilty having Edgar whacked. He seemed like a regular sort of guy. And it was, after all, Edgar that made it all possible. I'd probably end up giving Edgar's wife the money back. That would still leave me twenty-five thousand plus expenses. For an extra hundred I could give her Ralph the Barge's number.

Five grand bet at the track, even a big handle track like Hialeah, would knock hell out

of the price. Sid's line was busy, but I got him on the second try.

"Luther's Feed and Supply . . . feed, hay, nails, manure, flyswatters . . ."

"Knock it off, Sid. It's me, Joe Standard."

"How'd it go? How'd Ironbelly do?"

"He got decked. Look I got something importa . . ."

"I told him he was getting too goddamn old. Did he tell you he was going to hire a hit man? Don't worry about it—it's his brother-in-law, he's an undertaker in Atlantic City. Used to work for Galen Sloan until he shot himself in the foot. All they did the last time was get drunk and argue about how to get rid of the body."

"The hell with Ironbelly. I want to make a bet."

"I ain't takin' any more action on the Hurricanes," Sid warned. "Ain't enough line and I ain't getting enough vig to cover all these deadbeats. Now—the LSU game . . ."

"Goddamnit!" I shouted into the pay phone. "I don't want to make a stupid football bet. I want to bet five grand in the ninth at Hialeah."

That got his attention. After several seconds of silence he said, "Where the hell did you get five thousand dollars?"

"Never mind. Can you take the bet or not?"

"A horse bet from you—hell, yes—any hour of the day or night, nine days a week. But cash, up front—in my hand—before first post."

"I'll be over in half an hour."

The traffic was murder but I made it to Sid in Coral Gables and then back to Hialeah in time to hear the first race call out in the parking lot. Weekend bettors jammed every crevice including the toilets. I got my twenty dollar win ticket on the second race, then threaded my way into the upper grandstand to my usual spot. Swine was already there. He had a piece of the *Form* draped on my seat, holding it for me.

"You blew it," he said, peering at me over the top of the racing paper. "Maggie May went wire to wire, paid sixteen forty. I got her in the double with six horses."

"Couldn't help it. I had business," I told him, plopping down in my seat. "Anyway, that's chicken feed."

"Chicken feed? What the hell you talkin'?" Swine pointed at the tote in the infield where the daily double projected payoffs were displayed. "I got half the second race covered—look at that seven—four hundred twenty bucks . . . and the nine—a hundred and sixteen . . ."

"Yeah, but the favorite's got all the early speed. They ain't

going to catch him in three quarters." The favorite was the number two horse, Radial Earl. The public had already pounded him down to even money on the tote. I then pointed out the obvious. "He wins and your double ticket is only worth forty-six dollars."

"The trouble with you is you're a pessimist," Swine said. "I ain't even got a ticket on the two. With all that other speed in there, he's got to hang it up at the eighth pole."

"I think that clamorous din you pipe into your ears all day long has shaken your brain loose. The rest of the donkeys in this race are gonna have to grow wings if they want to stay within five lengths of that two horse."

"Five bucks says he don't hit the board," Swine said, producing a five spot. "Come on, come on, put up or shut up."

"You want to get rid of your bankroll that bad, why don't you just set fire to it?"

"Ha, just like I figured. You know I'm right. Admit it."

"Like hell," I said, snatching the fiver he waved under my nose.

The second race was a sprint, six furlongs. Radial Earl broke on top. He went into the first turn leading by two lengths. At the top of the stretch he led by three. At the eighth pole he was

leading by five, at the sixteenth pole by seven. The jock was cleaning his fingernails when he sailed across the finish, an easy winner in front by nine.

"Damn!" Swine shouted, ripping his double tickets into confetti. "I shoulda guessed. He had the wind behind him."

It was the cabbage working. I pulled the twenty dollar win ticket out of my shirt pocket and stuck it up in Swine's face.

He quickly offered up the standard sour grapes response. "So what? It ain't gonna pay nothin'."

"Just doubled my money is all."

Swine slouched down and buried his head in the *Form*. "Even a blind hog finds an acorn every once in a while."

We sat through five more races. It was difficult to contain my excitement as the ninth race drew ever closer. Even though I had all my bets memorized, I went down and bought another *Form* just to burn off some nervous energy. Swine was losing his shorts with businesslike precision. I hadn't planned on saying anything to him about the sure thing but found myself blurting it out as the pressure mounted.

"I got five grand bet in the ninth race with Sid. It's a sure thing."

"What are you, some kinda

comedian? Get outta my face with that crap. Goddamn Lombriz on that six horse musta had a tube of airplane glue jammed up his nose. You see how wide he went on the turns? Looked like he was gonna ride that sucker out on to Fourth Avenue and pick up a six pack."

"It ain't no joke, you nitwit," I told him. The lack of solid food and the pressure tended to make me a bit short-tempered.

Swine lowered his paper; his music racked brain slowly chewed over the possibility that I might be serious. "You bet five thousand dollars on a sure thing?"

"Yes."

He grinned, showing me his crooked buck teeth. "There ain't no sure things," he declared. "It's impossible. But not as impossible as you havin' five grand. Does it say 'stupid' on my forehead, or what?"

There was no recourse. I started at the beginning and told him the whole story. When I got to the part about Frosty Fred being sold to a breeding syndicate and Dabbilit in with a bad back just to fill the race, Swine's eyes began to shine.

"Jeezus," Swine said, flipping the pages in his paper to the ninth race. "With them two doggin' it, there won't be no race. Hitch Your Star already beat them other four horses by

six lengths in an allowance race two weeks ago. Loan me a hundred bucks."

I agreed to lend him the hundred but not until just before the ninth. Swine kept his nose in the *Form* while I mentally spent the twenty-five thousand. He broke the silence just as I was making the down payment on my duplex.

"You say a breeding syndicate bought Frosty Fred?"

"That's right. They're going to stand him at stud up in New York."

"I don't think so," Swine said.

"What you talkin' about?"

"I don't think they're going to stand him at stud," Swine repeated.

"Why not?"

He stuck the paper under my nose and pointed with his finger to the past performance for Frosty Fred, then explained, "He won't be standing a long time—he's a gelding."

I felt the blood rush to my face and that prickly, sweaty sensation in my armpits. "That scum sucking, & # \$ * & % % # % * % & & , son of a putrid ** & \$ # % & —he stiffed me!"

Swine slouched down with his paper. "So much for sure things."

I thought about calling Sid to cancel the bet. Not possible. The phones are switched off during the races. Sid wouldn't

call off the bet anyway. He's more of a swine than Swine.

Post for the ninth race was fifteen minutes away. Old Oslo and probably that no good * & \$ # & # \$ # \$ # & * Edgar were down in the paddock saddling Hitch Your Star. I spurned the escalators in favor of the stairs and made it to the paddock about the time the guy with the bugle was calling out the horses for the ninth race.

Oslo was leading his horse out with the jockey up just as I got to the paddock rail. "Oslo! Wait a minute."

"How you doin', Joe? . . . I mean Marvin." He looked furtively about. "Err . . . Mr. Stienbergglebaum."

"Where's Walters?" I asked him.

Oslo shrugged. "Don't know. Ought to be here . . . usually is."

"He stiffed me!" I shouted at Oslo. A couple of hardboots leaning on the paddock rail gave me the once over, so I lowered my voice. "He told me Frosty Fred was sold yesterday to a breeding outfit in New York—that Dabbilit had a bad back. He said Hitch Your Star was going to win big. I bet a lot of money . . ."

Oslo, grinning like a constipated simian, took great delight in informing me, yet again, that Frosty Fred was gelded,

then added, "You can't believe nothin' Walters tells you. He lies. Goes out of his way to stiff people. Gets his yucks that way." The last of the entries for the ninth race filed past. "I got to go," Oslo said, pulling on Hitch Your Star. "You want to find Edgar, try the horseman's parking lot. He's got a motor home parked there."

Hialeah Park takes up a lot of space, eleven city blocks long and about six wide right in the heart of Hialeah. And it's a good hike to the stable parking lot from the paddock. I strolled over that way in a controlled gallop. The motor home was one of those thirty footers, and brand new.

I'd already decided I wasn't going to knock before I noticed the door was ajar. What else? I took a look inside. Edgar wasn't alone. There was a woman with him. She had on rather slack-fitting denims and a flannel shirt cinched altogether with an extra-wide belt. Her blonde tresses, jammed up under a baseball cap, were barely visible. She cut the figure of a trick-or-treater in the getup. But the dark glasses tipped me off, and when she moved and spoke, even without the cocktail dress, you couldn't mistake Mrs. Walters. Hard also to miss the chrome-plated automatic she held with both hands.

"But why, Kim?" I heard Edgar ask in quavering voice.

"Why?" his wife repeated. "You lie, steal, beat me, cheat on me, and you ask me why."

"I'll change . . . I'll . . ."

"I'm going to kill you," she told him.

"You can't get away with it . . . the crowds . . ." Edgar stopped there, probably realizing in all likelihood there was not a soul around to hear or see. The parking lot was deserted. There are no pari-mutuel machines or horses running in the horseman's lot. There are no people arriving or leaving like in the public lot. The security people are sparse away from the action, and all the horsemen who were going to leave had left.

"No one will hear the shot. No one will see me leave," she assured him.

"Wait, now wait," Edgar pleaded. "The police will know it was you . . . who else could they possibly suspect?"

"Me? I hardly think so. You're a lying, insensitive bully. There is no end to the people who would like to see you dead. Didn't you tell me someone tried to beat you up this morning? And you knocked him down. There's someone else with a motive. I've been at the Sullivans' cocktail party all afternoon. Alan Sullivan offered to give me a lift home. You re-

member Alan. I changed outfits in the back of his car. He's waiting for me in the grandstand." She backed toward the door. "His father will undoubtedly see to it that Alan takes over your directorship." Her eyes never left Edgar as she carefully reached back for the door knob.

I jerked the door open, grabbed her arm, and tossed her out. She sent one round crashing through the roof. When she hit the ground, I stood on her wrist and relieved her of the automatic.

Edgar was in the doorway. "Jeezus, am I glad to see you! It's Stienberger, isn't it?"

"Mr. Stienberger to you, sewer scum."

It went right past him. He got vocal. "Did you hear her threaten me? She knew I'd be here today because of Hitch Your Star. She waited for me. It's premeditated. It's attempted murder. You're a witness, Stienberger."

"You stiffed me," I replied.

He wasn't listening. "First, I'm gonna beat the hell out of her. Next I'll beat the hell out of that Sullivan kid, and turn 'em both over to the cops. Then I'm gonna divorce her. She tried to kill me. That's better grounds than mental cruelty."

Mrs. Walters got to her feet. Edgar started for her with fists balled up.

I stuck the gun in his ear. "Hold it there!"

"What you doing, Stienberger? Give me the gun."

"You shut up and listen," I instructed. And that's what he did, so I put the gun in my back pocket. "First off," I told him, "I didn't see or hear nothin'. You stiffed me, so you can forget about me talkin' to the cops. I don't care if you divorce your wife. I don't care if you turn her over to the cops. But if you ever beat on her, or you ever stiff anybody again, I'm gonna tear your face off."

"Big talk from a man with a gun, I bet you would..." That's all he got to say before a short, sharp left jab made his nose splat. He was good. Then, too, the cabbage diet had weakened me considerably. It took nearly forty seconds to beat the livin' crap out of him. I ended up with a small cut on my cheek from his ring. He was out, lying in a pile, both eyes swelled shut and blood bubbles puffing out of what was left of his mouth. I stuffed the gun in my belt. "If he hits you again, let me know. I'll hang on to this piece for you."

"You fool!" she screamed at me. "You ruined everything."

I caught her by the wrist when she took her feeble swing at me. "It's not my place to tell you what to do," I told her. "But I think you ought to find that

little twinkie with you and get the hell outta here before Edgar comes around." She made a few gagging, strangling noises, then took off running toward the grandstand entrance.

When I got back up to my seat, they were filling the gate for the tenth race. I wasn't too worried about Edgar's filing an assault charge. Stiffing someone is more than reasonable provocation—it was justifiable assault. Anyway, he thought I was some geek named Stienberger and his wife wasn't likely to tell him different.

Swine was crumpled up into his fetal-ball position in the folding seat, a posture he assumes when all the money he has or expects to have for several months has been unwisely wagered.

I pulled the racing paper from off his head. "What happened in the ninth?" I asked him.

"You didn't really have a bet with Sid, did ya?" he asked. I nodded in the affirmative. He shook his head. "I never seen nothin' like it. First off, they put all the horses in the gate for the start. Dabbilit gets a bit raunchy in there, falls down and gets wedged in the chute. He's stuck under there for a couple minutes with the starters tuggin' and pullin' on him. Finally they get him out. He's all washy and tore up, so the vet scratches him. So then, they

put 'em all back in, and bang—out they go."

"Okay—so who won?" I prompted when he stopped to jam a cigarette in his kisser.

"I'm gettin' to it. Frosty Fred is sailin' along six lengths in front at the top of the stretch. Nothin' is goin' to catch him. He makes the turn . . . you know them airplanes that fly over here all the time pullin' them advertising banners? The ones with . . ."

"Goddamn it, I know what you're talkin' about. Forget about the damn airplanes. Get back to the race."

"I can't tell you what happened without I tell you about the airplane."

"Okay, okay," I relented. "What about the airplane?"

"Well, it's flying over totin' one of those banners. Just as Frosty Fred gets to mid-stretch, the shadow of the banner spreads across the track in front of him. He don't know what the hell it is. He tries to jump over it. Pitches the jock off into the shrubbery."

"You mean . . ."

"What else?" Swine said. "Hitch Your Star beat the rest of the field by twelve. You won."

I leaned back in the seat as the starter sprang the gate for the tenth race. In all the excitement I forgot about it. Of course I won. The cabbage was

SOLUTION TO THE MID-DECEMBER "UNSOLVED":

Score one point for each correct answer to questions 1 to 20, and two points for each correct identification in the final bonus question.

1. 5:45
2. Saturday, the only day the produce store was open after 5:00
3. Jane's
4. Bates Ave.
5. Two
6. Yes
7. Three
8. No
9. Eight
10. V.L.
11. A falling potted plant
12. Woman
13. Crawfordtown Produce
14. Myrtle St.
15. Grapes
16. F472
17. It was parked in a 4-6 P.M. NO PARKING zone.
18. Left rear tire
19. Her purse was being picked.
20. No

Bonus: B and E

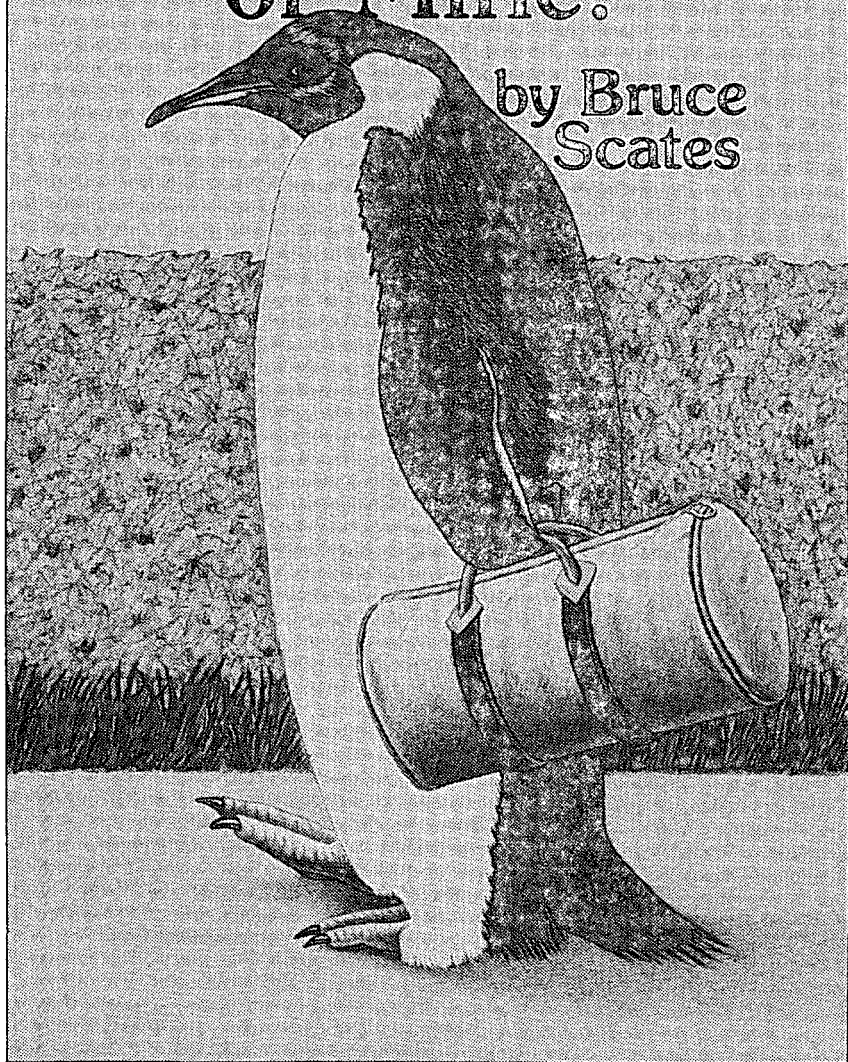
Ratings

- 20-24: Lieutenant Columbo
16-19: Old Hawk Eyes
10-15: Sharp Observer
5-9: Inspector Clouseau
1-4: Amnesiac

FICTION

Your Penguin or Mine?

by Bruce
Scates



On a certain night Rona Durant decided to leave her husband. She wouldn't even tell him she was leaving. ("The bastard!") *Freedom!*

On a certain night Jerry Durant decided to leave Rona Durant, his wife. He wouldn't even tell her he was leaving. ("The bitch!") *Freedom!*

On a certain night Eddie Spang decided to practice his profession at a rambling Colonial-style house in the suburbs: *Burglary!*

On a certain night a state-of-the-art blonde coed whose major was cheerleading and whose minor was "Illegal Substances: Their Care and Distribution" decided to stand under a window of the house next door to hers and moan. *Moaning!*

With her perfect hair, her perfect teeth, her perfect perpetually dilated, peerlessly depraved green eyes glowing in the dark, Bobbi Whittier clutched a tennis racket and moaned: "Anyone for tennis?" She whimpered: "Come and play games with me, Jerr." She growled tigerishly: "I want your forehand." She panted: "Yes I said yes I will yes receive your overhead smash!"

Jerry Durant had started

giving Bobbi Whittier tennis lessons when she was eleven, years old. He had started giving her tennis rackets, jeans, record albums, concert tickets, compact disc players, and the Pill when she was 35-18-34.

"I want your child," Bobbi moaned up at the window. "Or your fur coat, whichever comes first."

Bobbi bounced a can of tennis balls in her right hand. She threw the can of tennis balls through Jerry Durant's bedroom window. Glass tinkled.

"I also want your Porsche, Jerr!"

Blackmail!

In the Durants' living room:

"See-you-in-the-morning," said Jerry Durant, a puffy-faced man of forty-three who pretended to have lustrous jet-black hair, eyebrows, and mustache with the help of Clairol dye. He also pretended to be an honest businessman (*Jerry's BIG SAVINGS Appliances*) with the help of deeply and movingly creative bookkeeping which he did himself. (*Two sets*—and they were both honeys.)

"See-you-in-the-morning," said Rona Durant, who was five feet eleven, had a palely dimpled Scandinavian face, wore a pair of flaxen braids, and looked as if she could wrestle professionally under the name of

"Heidi the Hun." She was also terribly nearsighted but wouldn't wear her glasses except in bed, where she claimed she needed them to detect certain teeny parts of Jerry's anatomy. (The Durants currently slept in separate bedrooms. They also had zero children and one point five marriages each.)

Jerry looked at Rona and lifted his glass of scotch to her and smiled. *God, how I hate that woman.*

Rona looked at Jerry and narrowed her eyelids to thin slits and smiled back at him. *God, how I hate that man.*

Scratch, scratch, scratch.

Eddie Spang, burglar, twenty-nine years old, crouched in some bushes he hoped to God weren't poison ivy or some bushes crouched on him which he *really* hoped to God weren't poison ivy. But he knew—*knew*—they were poison ivy. To Eddie all bushes that grew outside of the safety of the city and God-made concrete and asphalt were poison ivy. The suburbs were a *jungle!*

Eddie watched and waited and scratched and carried on a vigorous inner dialogue:

"What was that?"

"A twig."

"You're sure?"

"It was a twig."

"What was *that*?"

"ANOTHER twig."

"A what?"

"A goddam flying twig!"

"A —!"

"WHEN ARE THESE PEOPLE GOING TO BED?"

Eddie wished he could see just one mugger. Or even a single run-of-the-mill pervert. So he could feel at home. Something reassuring. *Normal.*

"What was that?"

"A mosquito."

"Ohhhmmmyyygodd!"

In her bedroom (formerly *their* bedroom) Rona Durant telephoned Barry Frisbie, an assistant tennis pro at their country club. Barry had a great forehead, great hair (blond, curly), great muscles (everywhere), and only two thoughts in his head: tennis and sex. Rona had reached the age when she had only three thoughts in her head: tennis, sex, and money. Barry wasn't perfect but two out of three wasn't bad.

"Barry? *Rona.* Pick me up in twenty minutes. We're going south of the border."

"Gee, will I need shots?"

"Smallpox, malaria, the Black Death, and rabies."

She could hear his forehead ripple over the telephone. "Wow, rabies?"

Rona said, "*Woof, woof.*" Then she hung up. Giggling.

Putting on her eyeglasses,

Rona picked up her suitcase. Just simple things she'd need. A few clothes, a *lot* of credit cards. Her jewelry case. A pair of matched antique silver candlesticks that had been in Jerry's family for years and that she took to remember Jerry's mother by. (She remembered Jerry's mother staring at her and saying to her son: "*So who's your fat friend?*" AT THE WEDDING RECEPTION!)

Also she packed a stuffed toy penguin with a yellow rubber beak that glowed in the dark and whose top-hatted head unscrewed and concealed a secret cavity where she kept a little something that made her head unscrew.

She decided to take a quick shower before Barry arrived.

Pack, pack, pack.

In his bedroom (formerly the guestroom), Jerry Durant packed a suitcase. Bare necessities. A few bottles of scotch. The plaid sports jacket Rona hated. The vibrator she loved. Both sets of *Jerry's BIG SAVINGS Appliances* books. A plain paper bag that contained the jewelry he had removed from Rona's case and which was almost as valuable as he had told her they were when he gave them to her.

Then he looked around for a stuffed toy penguin with a yellow

rubber beak that glowed in the dark and a foot that unscrewed and concealed a secret cavity where he kept a little something (supplied by Bobbi) that made him not care which way his head was screwed on.

The stuffed toy penguin was gone!

WHAT KIND OF FILTHY SNEAKING LOWLIFE SLIME WOULD KIDNAP A STUFFED TOY PENGUIN WITH A YELLOW RUBBER BEAK THAT GLOWS IN THE DARK?

So Jerry went into Rona's room (wincing as he heard her singing "The Girl from Ipanema" in the shower), saw the stuffed toy penguin with the yellow rubber beak that glowed in the dark lying beside her suitcase (the significance of the suitcase not registering on his kidnapped penguin-grieving plus scotch-steeped brain), nodded as he picked up her eyeglasses and dropped them out the window, cradled the stuffed penguin in his arms, and returned with dignity to his room, only falling down once. Then he had another scotch to celebrate the reunion of a man and his penguin. Tears welled.

Bobbi Whittier had had *enough!* No more *hinting!* No more *subtle!* *She was going in!* She hitched up her adorably sassy lemon-yellow tennis skirt.

She tightened her cruel cruel Ninja-black halter. She clutched her tennis racket between her perfect white teeth as if it were a pirate's cutlass. She was going to bring back that Porsche dead or alive! Or at least no more than two years old and with less than twenty-five thousand miles on it.

She opened the Durants' sliding patio door (which Jerry had been too unscrewed to remember to lock) and stalked.

The hell with it!

Eddie Spang, city burglar moonlighting in the suburbs, had been assaulted by bushes, mosquitoes, crickets, moths, and various other Unidentified Flying and Non-Flying (god-damn crawling) Objects.

Now he had been slimed by a SLUG.

By God, he was going to rip off everything these barbarians had that was worth more than nine ninety-eight. People who keep slugs deserve everything they get.

Eddie patted his chrome-plated .25 (wimpy and gaudy but his mother had given it to him for his fourteenth birthday and it was the thought that counted) and went in through a first-floor side window that he found unlocked. (*Suburban-ites!*)

Inside: TOTAL DARKNESS.

Do these suckers use *blackout curtains*?

Eddie flicked on his flashlight. GERONIMO!

On the street Barry Frisbie parked his red Fiero and bounced up to the Durants' front door. He looked mostly great. His blond hair glowed in the dark *and* curled naturally in the dark. He also had a dazzlingly white-toothed smile and an I.Q. that Rona considered nearly as high as his dental count. And he had at *least* thirty-two teeth.

Tonight, however, he looked mostly great instead of absolutely great because he was frowning. Rona's phone call had thrown his forehead into unsightly wrinkling perturbation and had penetrated all the way into his brain. Those RABIES SHOTS. Was Rona kidding? Or *not kidding*? That kind of thing wasn't anything to kid about. Rabies could ruin his tennis game. Maybe even his sex life.

Barry found the Durants' front door unlocked. He stepped inside the house, into a hall.

Dark. Very dark.

He took a right and a left.

Bobbi took a left and a right.

Eddie Spang took a Sony Compact Disc Player and a

Panasonic Camcorder. And a cordless telephone and a five and a half inch color television plus radio.

He wasn't alone.

Barry Frisbie squinted into the darkness.

Someone. Someone not moving. Like him. But someone panting.

Sexy panting.

Rona?

Barry reached his hand out, tentatively, hopefully.

His hand encountered a pair of buttocks.

Well, great.

Sliding higher, his definitely hopeful hand stroked a pair of—

Great!

And, climbing higher, a tennis racket raised overhead in a smash position.

Gee. Neat form. Rona was really getting the hang of it.

Barry whispered: "Have you had your rabies shot?"

"What?" came a return whisper.

Barry said, "Woof, woof."

"You slimy barking cheapo creep!"

The tennis racket hit him on top of the head.

Barry hit the floor.

Bobbi said, "Don't think you can get out of a Porsche by lying there." She added, "And moaning." She continued, "Give me

Porsche." She kicked him and amplified, "Jerry, I want a Porsche." She spelled it out, "P-O-R-S-C-H-E." She calmed down and started kicking him with the other foot, "Will *Jer-ree* give his sweetsie-sweetsie a Porschie-Worschie?" She growled and said, "Will the evil perverted whimpering slob give me a Porsche?" She said, enjoying herself now, "*Gimme Porsche.*"

Rona Durant cocked her head alertly.

What's that noise?

There it was again.

BURGLAR!

Rona clenched her jaw, looked around—where the hell were her eyeglasses?—picked up an umbrella, and looked every inch Heidi the Hun.

A *squinting* Heidi the Hun. "I'll get the sneaking bastard."

She crept stealthily down the stairs. Feeling her way. She couldn't see a thing. Not in the dark and without her glasses.

But near the foot of the stairs she heard something. A *woman's* voice. A woman's voice talking to Rona's husband.

"Jerry, give me—"

And deep-throated animalistic male moaning.

RIGHT IN HER OWN HOUSE!

Rona changed direction and tiptoed for the living room. Bur-

glars were one thing, husbands another. She wanted something heavier than an umbrella for husbands. She headed for the fireplace and the iron poker.

I'll kill the bastard!

In the dark Jerry Durant came down the stairs looking for a drink.

In the dark Eddie Spang came out of a looted room looking for another room to loot.

In the dark Rona Durant came looking for her husband.

"Gaaaaahhhhhh!" said Eddie Spang, bumping into someone in the dark and dropping his flashlight, which flicked off.

"Aaaaarrrrrgggghhhh!" said Rona Durant, the bumpee. The attacking bumpee. Rona the Righteous Defender of Hearth and Home Against the Rotten Criminal Element. That is, her husband.

Wait till she got her hands on the thug!

Rona got her hands on the thug. Also her legs. It seemed to Eddie Spang like all four hands and certainly a good half dozen legs. He crashed to the floor with the flying octopus on top of him.

Fortunately for Eddie, Rona had dropped her fireplace poker in all the sudden athletic activity. Unfortunately for Eddie, she still had her shoes.

Sitting on top of Eddie in the

almost total darkness, she proceeded to hammer the back of his head with the heel of one of her shoes—briskly, but without hurry, like a carpenter pounding tenpenny nails.

She said, "It's Slut Time, eh?" *Swat.* She said, "That Overdeveloped Omelet Brained Coke-head Next Door, eh?" *Whack.* She added, squinting, "How blind do you think I am, eh?" *Wham.* She continued, "Want to turn over and let me do the other side, eh?" *Rap.* "This one's getting a little soft." *Crash.*

Eddie Spang groaned.

"Darling, what are you trying to say?"

Boom.

Jerry Durant, decanter in hand, wobbled in what he vaguely believed was the general direction of the stairs, only falling down once.

Suddenly he paused.

He heard a man's groans. After several seconds he decided they weren't *his* groans.

And then he heard Rona's voice: "Darling, what are you trying to say?"

His wife and another man!

Well. Well. Well.

Unsteadily Jerry Durant fumble-felt his way along the hall to the stairs. Carefully he set the decanter on a step. He rolled his sleeves up. *Damn the Torpedoes. Don't Tread on Me.* THE BIGGER THEY ARE

THE HARDER THEY FALL.

Jerry adopted a shaky wrestler's stance and began to advance crablike on where he judged his ruthless and cunning opponent to be in the darkness.

"This is no *fun* any more!" pouted Bobbi Whittier. Besides, both her feet were getting tired from kicking. So she stopped kicking the wretch lying at her feet in the darkness.

It showed what a party poop Jerry was these days. He just lay there and whimpered. Maybe he was some sickening weirdo masochist and enjoyed being hit by a tennis racket and kicked by expensive tennis shoes? Well, she'd punish the whimpering little sicko by *not* punishing him.

Bobbi said adultly, "We'll discuss this like two adults when you've stopped enjoying yourself in this disgusting way, Jerr. But let me say—you need *help*. And just let me add—I need a *Porsche*."

With a haughty toss of her hair, Bobbi headed for what she thought was the patio door.

But . . .

"Last of the Mohicans!"

With a belch of pure rage, Jerry Durant took a flying leap at the figure in the dark. Jerry Durant: HUSBAND FROM HELL!

Since the figure's back was to him, he couldn't see the perfect hair and perfect teeth that glowed in the dark and the perfect knockers that who gave a damn if they didn't glow in the dark.

"The Hell with the Alimony!"

Jerry threw at her everything in his old high school wrestler's repertoire. The *Hammerlock*. His ruthless and sneaky opponent said, "Wow." The good old *Grapevine*. She commented, "Kinky!" The *Bar Arm*. She chirped, "MORE!" The absolutely merciless and never-fail *Chicken Wing*. She hissed, "A little lower."

Jerry quickly ran out of steam. And he wasn't getting anywhere. She was enjoying this a lot more than he was. Killing Rona was just like having sex with her.

"Well, for Christ's sake," Jerry said, and lumbered to his feet. He needed a drink.

He stumbled away in the dark, only falling down once.

"YOU FILTHY BRUTAL TOTALLY DEPRAVED DISGUSTING LOWLIFE DEGENERATE UNREAL ANIMAL!" Bobbi called after him.

When he didn't come back, she said, "Jerr?" She scrambled to her feet. She called, "Wait for me!"

Bobbi lurched into the darkness, in pursuit of a sick mind she could call her own.

She bumped into a door, fumbled it open, and lunged through it.

Only it was the door to the basement stairs.

Bobbie said:

"WWWWWooooowww—!"

Falling.

Mrs. Edith Pyp, a next door neighbor of the Durants', telephoned the police. She wanted to report an excessively noisy party.

A group of people were having a good time *and with all the lights off!*

Landsakes!

Barry Frisbie was confused. He was conscious and he was confused. Barely conscious. Deeply confused. Even for Barry, who was certain about few things in life except his forehead and his tan.

All he could remember was that he had been attacked by Rona. His Rona baby. Attacked with a good graphite tennis racket and a pair of sturdy-sole but chic tennis shoes. Also ached by a really neat overhead smash.

Why? Why? Why?

It had something to do with rabies. That much he remembered.

Rabies.

Rona has *rabies*. Of course!

That explained it. The sudden mood swings, the irritabil-

ity, the restlessness. Probably water buildup, too.

He had heard of that. On Donahue. *The Pre-Rabies Syndrome*.

She had been too embarrassed to tell him. She had finally just burst out like that. Just exploded.

Typical of rabies, of course. He nodded understandingly, Donahueishly.

Poor rabid honeybunch.

He would show her he wasn't just a stupid insensitive macho fabulously handsome jock with a great forehead and a really super tan. He'd show her he knew how to relate to a liberated, *today* woman.

Jesus Christ!

Jerry Durant nearly dropped the decanter.

In the darkness something had grabbed his legs. Something had fallen on its knees and was pleading, its arms wrapped around Jerry's legs.

"Darling, it doesn't matter if you have rabies," the something whimpered.

At Jerry's feet sobbing noises were going on! Pressing-its-wet-nose-against-his-pants noises! *Kissing* noises!

Jerry froze. *Rona!* A dementedly lust-crazed Rona. An absolutely off her rocker Rona. My God, even her *voice* had changed!

"Bite me! Bite me! I don't care! I don't care!"

Good God! The BITCH!

Gaaaahhhh!

Jerry swung the decanter frantically in the darkness.

Rona Durant crept down the basement stairs in the dark, squinting. Something odd was going on in the house. A girl needed a baseball bat. Or a lead pipe. A shovel, at least.

Why am I in the dark in the basement? she suddenly asked herself.

Rona turned on the stairs light.

She quickly turned the light off.

There was a body lying at the bottom of the stairs.

She turned the light back on. Bobbi Whittier.

Instantly Rona saw the headline: "WOMAN ARRESTED FOR BASHING HUBBIE'S TEEN TOOTSIE."

It would ruin her chances for alimony, her tennis game, her hair and nails for ten-to-fifteen years, even with a parole! The beauty salons alone in women's prisons must be sheer tasteless hells, judging from the way those women cons looked on *60 Minutes*.

Five minutes later Rona had dragged Bobbi into the garage, to Rona's Cadillac, heaved her onto the floor of the back seat,

and thrown an old sheet over her.

Breathing heavily, Rona tiptoed back upstairs to get her car keys.

This place was a madhouse!

Eddie Spang felt his head—Holy Jesus: it was covered with *lumps*! It felt as if tenpenny nails had been hammered into his skull.

What the hell had happened?

He had broken into an insane asylum! It was the only logical explanation. A joint full of psycho wackos. Axe murderers. Norman Bates-types.

The thing that had jumped on him in the dark and called him a "slut" wasn't even *human*.

He had to get out of here. Fast. Before the **THING** came back.

Where was his loot? The *hell* with his loot! He'd take the first thing he could grab in the god-damn dark and beat it.

He grabbed the first thing his hand clutched in the dark and beat it.

He didn't even notice that the thing he grabbed in the dark had a rubber beak.

A yellow rubber beak that glowed in the dark.

Jerry Durant discovered that smashing someone over the head with a decanter of whisky was a sobering experience. Even if

that someone was your sex-crazed Scandinavian bimbo wrestler lookalike wife.

God, he felt *terrible* about that whisky! He could hear it dripping in the dark.

He fumbled for the hall light switch. The lights came on.

He saw it wasn't only whisky that was dripping.

It also wasn't his sex-crazed Scandinavian bimbo wrestler lookalike wife.

He had seen the guy somewhere before. There was a tennis racket nearby. Also bits of racket stringing clung to his naturally curly hair and around his ears and shoulders. Tennis . . . *the assistant pro at the club!* Barry something. The one who worked on Rona's forehead. The one who . . .

Jerry suddenly saw it all: "MAN SMASHES WIFE'S SERVER." My God—ten to fifteen years in prison, even with a parole! He couldn't keep up his bookkeeping—*both* books. They had become a kind of hobby for Jerry. Almost an art form.

Five minutes later he finished lifting the sex-crazed non-Scandinavian tennis player into the trunk of Rona's Cadillac (Jerry's Mercedes was in the repair shop), tossed a blanket over him, and shut the trunk lid, only falling down once.

He then went out through the

garage's side door and started shambling down the long driveway towards the road.

He needed some fresh air before he did anything more. He also needed a drink.

Rona Durant, having gone to her room and combed and lip-sticked, gotten her purse and car keys, and picked up her suitcase and a plain but stunning length of metal pipe she had found in the garage in case she saw her husband, tiptoed down the stairs to the first floor.

Where she saw her husband.

Or rather she saw a dark form skulking in a typically husbandly way while carrying a yellow beak that glowed in the dark.

"GIVE ME THAT PENGUIN!" she roared.

Another one! thought Eddie. He grabbed for his chromed .25.

"You filthy slimy inhuman rat-faced penguin-stealing thief!" bellowed Rona. She grabbed for her metal pipe.

Holy Jesus, thought Eddie, I recognize that voice! THE MAD HAMMERER! *I'll get a medal if I drop this wacko!* He whipped his gun out of his waistband and swiveled it (GOD-THIS-IS-GREAT!) Dirty Harry-ishly in the direction of the dark stairs and the hulking charging shape. And then Eddie shouted, "Eat lead, psycho!" and — *whoops*

—flung the pistol at Rona's little toe.

There was a cry of pain in the darkness.

Then a roar: "*Wife-beater!*"

Something hit Eddie on the top of his head. Not for the first time in this house. But definitely for the last time.

Rona thought: Where the hell is Barry? He should've been here by now. Do I have to do everything by myself?

By herself Rona put what she thought was her filthy slimy inhuman rat-faced penguin-stealing husband's body in the Cadillac's back seat, on top of Bobbi Whittier.

After she shut the car door she remembered her spare eyeglasses in the Cadillac's glove compartment.

She opened the garage door, got in the driver's seat, put on the spare glasses (*Thank God*—she felt she had been stumbling around half blind all night) and drove down the highway.

Jerry had walked for MILES. Two blocks at *least*. Thirsty and dazed he lurched under a bright street light.

Screech!

A Cadillac slammed to a halt a few feet past him.

My God, that's lucky! He could use a lift.

Jerry opened the front passenger door and climbed in.

"YOU'RE NOT DEAD!"

Rona Durant stared horrified at Jerry Durant.

"YOU'VE GOT RABIES!"

Jerry Durant stared horrified at Rona Durant.

Jerry panicked and tried to open the passenger door. Rona panicked and hit the accelerator pedal.

The Cadillac weaved from side to side down the road, its two occupants trying to escape and punch each other's teeth out at the same time.

The police car—only thirty-five minutes after receiving the telephone call—was responding to Mrs. Pyp's report on loud behavior at the Durants' home.

The car and its two officers were two blocks from the Durants' neighborhood when they spotted loud behavior in an automobile. A careening, weaving Cadillac. A riot in an automobile.

Siren whining, they chased it down.

They were assisted in their lawful pursuit by a volunteer telephone pole which got in Rona's way.

The Cadillac stopped abruptly. The hood sprang open. The back doors flew wide. Also the trunk popped up.

When the police car screeched

to a halt behind the Cadillac, a wild-eyed man reeking of alcohol also popped out of the Cadillac.

"She's trying to kill me again! First she tried to bite me, then she tried to hit me with a telephone pole!"

Jerry Durant staggered a few feet toward the policemen.

Something with a yellow rubber beak that glowed in the dark came *whooshing* out through the driver's window.

It hit Jerry in the back.

He dropped with a hoarse scream.

"*All right*," Jerry sobbed, face down in the road, his voice mingling rage, terror, and drunken dementia, "Bite me, bite me! I just don't care! I don't *care* if you've got rabies!"

One of the cops said: "Rabies?"

The other cop stared into the Cadillac's trunk and then into the back seat: "Jesus Christ!"

Jerry whispered: "Watch out for her teeth."

The first cop repeated: "RABIES?"

The penguin's yellow beak glowed . . .

"*Sunufabitch!*"

"Get her, get her, **GET HER!**" both cops yelled at the same time, grabbing for their guns.

BANG! BANG! BANG! BANG!

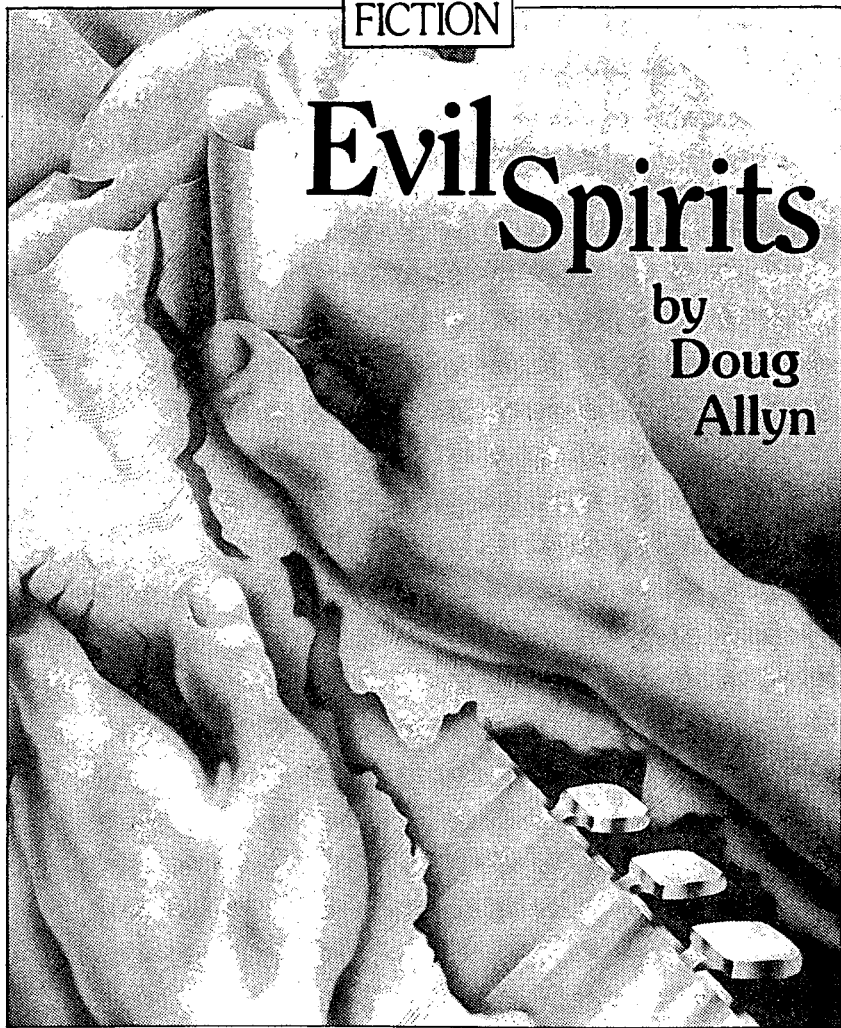
They riddled the stuffed toy penguin full of lead.

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FICTION

Evil Spirits

by
Doug
Allyn



Todd Spitzer was on the phone talking to Mick Jagger when I walked into his office. Nothing unusual in that. Half of the record execs I do business with are making phone deals when I come in, dropping big names and bigger

numbers. Often as not they're talking to Dial-a-Prayer. But not Todd. For one thing he was doing more listening than talking, and for another, he's too high up the corporate ladder to bother trying to impress me. He waved me into the overstuffed

leather armchair facing his desk, and slid a contract over to me. I glanced through it quickly. It looked much too good to be true, so it probably wasn't.

Over the years I've developed a kind of sixth sense about bad deals, a shiver, like someone stepping on my grave. As I scanned the contract more carefully, I expected to feel a quiver with every line. It didn't happen. The deal read like a Christmas present, which made me feel distinctly uneasy. The only thing Todd Spitzer and Santa have in common is waist size.

Todd is four hundred pounds if he's an ounce, and vaguely resembles a supermarket carp stuffed into a three-piece suit. Pudgy-faced, horn-rimmed glasses, fine sandy hair fashionably frizzed to conceal his bald spot. A new-generation record exec, youngish, M.B.A. degree, bottom-line mentality, button-down soul. He said yes-sir to Mick or whoever, hung up, and swung around to face me.

"Well, Ohanian," he said, "how do you like the concept?"

"A reunion album? Summer of '68?" I said, still scanning the fine print. "Sounds like a terrific idea."

"I'm planning a whole series," Spitzer nodded brusquely, "using flash-in-the-pan bands

who were hot between '67 and '70 that no one's heard of since. Demographics says the baby boomer market's still expanding, so the titles alone should sell a half million units and if we break a single into the Top 40 charts, we'll double our net. You locate the groups and sign them up, I'll handle production, we take five percent apiece, the groups get one each. They're all has-beens, and a go-getter like you should be able to close the deal in a week or two."

He was offering me a fifty-fifty split, plus a backhanded compliment. My palms began to sweat. What was the catch? "I don't know," I said slowly, "these groups aren't virgins, and a point an album's pretty skimpy even for has-beens."

"Come on, Kirk, they'll all swap their mothers for a record deal and you know it. What's your problem?"

As a last resort, try honesty, it'll confuse 'em every time. "The truth is, it looks almost too good, Mr. Spitzer," I said. "Why offer it to me?"

"I'm surprised you haven't guessed," he said, raising his eyebrows. "I'm being promoted. The board's dumping Terrell at the end of the month and making me president."

"No, I hadn't heard. Congratulations."

"Thank you. The thing is, I'm not particularly good at dealing

with people, Kirk, face to face, I mean. I'll need someone with me at the executive level who's assertive enough to deal with — unpleasant situations. And I think you may be the man for the job. This record deal's legitimate, it'll make money, but I'm more interested in how efficiently you handle it."

"A test," I said.

"Exactly," he nodded. "What do you say?"

"I'd say the board's chosen the right man, Mr. Spitzer, and so have you," I said, rising. "I'll have it wrapped by the end of the week."

"Good. I'm assigning each year of the series to a different talent agent, but frankly, I'm hoping you'll come in first. I like your style, Ohanian. In fact, I've, ah, even given you a little edge, I think."

"An edge?"

"The groups. Check the list."

I read the names on the back of the contract. And shivered as someone trod lightly on my grave. Evil Spirits. A name I hadn't seen in twenty years. "I'll have them all signed by the end of the week," I repeated, trying not to smile, "maybe sooner."

The key to running a successful entertainment agency is having a world-class secretary who does most of the work, and my Joyce

is one of the best. She isn't the typical Valley-girl type who decorate most L.A. offices, she's a paraplegic, and nearly blind. But she does dynamite phone, loves the business, and isn't likely to flip over some guitar player and split for Omaha in the middle of a week. I pay her triple the going rate, and she earns every dime. She located four of the groups on Spitzer's list by noon the next day and the musicians came streaming into my office like lemmings. Todd was right, of course, they never learn, no matter how many times they get burned. You just mumble the magic words, recording contract, and try not to get trampled in the stampede. We had them signed, sealed, and screwed down tight by the rush hour. All but Evil Spirits. This one, I wanted to handle personally.

The faded placard thumbtacked to the lounge doorway said Lonnie Cee Plays Your Favorites, but the piano bench was unoccupied. I scanned the nearly deserted lounge, one of the million-odd yuppie meat-market bars that've cloned themselves all over the west side the past few years, fake Warhol prints, philodendrons climbing the walls, dangling ivy, Okefenokee chic. A guy at the bar was wearing a powder blue tux, which made him either

a yokel bridegroom or the piano player. I pushed through the greenery and eased down a barstool away, ordered a Perrier twist, and glanced casually at Mr. After Six.

"Hello, Lonnie," I said.

"Howyadoin'," he nodded, without looking up, "whatcha wanna hear?"

"How about 'Smashin' Passion,'" I said, "or 'Snakeskin Cross'?"

He stared into his double scotch a moment, then turned slowly, frowning as he tried to place my face. "Kirk?" he said at last, "ah . . . Ohanian, right? Jeez, it's been a bunch." The years had been kinder to Lonnie than he deserved. He looked a bit dissipated, but wore it well. His square, peasant face was a little fleshier. Cocaine craters in his watery gray eyes. Older, but apparently no wiser.

"A few years," I nodded. "Still making music, I see."

"Gotta do whatcha gotta do, and I'm doin' okay. 'Course, playin' here's just a temporary thing. Helpin' out a friend. I mostly do studio work."

"Which studios?" I said.

"Lots of, ah, different ones," he said, examining his scotch for flotsam. "Hey, you look like a million bucks, Ohanian, what you into these days?"

"I'm in the music business, too, but at the other end now. I run an agency that does liai-

son work for the major record labels. Not as satisfying as managing a group of my own, of course, but not as—risky either. Do you ever hear from any of the Spirits any more?"

"Not really, I see Lugo once in a while. He's cookin' at a Mexican place out in Alhambra. Got a couple of Christmas cards from Trina, long time ago."

"How about Dudek? Ever hear from him?"

"The Dude? No, man," he scowled, shaking his head. "Not since the group went bust. And considering how freaky he was gettin' there at the end, I ain't sorry either. Why?"

"Just wondering. Thing is, I heard about this deal the other day, a reunion album, of groups that were hot in '68. Like we were. Not much money involved, but I might be able to cut you guys a piece of it."

"You mean cut some Evil Spirits music again? Are you serious?"

"Absolutely. Remakes are hot this year, and with the studio behind the album, it might even break big. Of course, if you're all booked up . . ."

"Well, hey, I could make time, you know, for auld lang syne. I mean, maybe the others aren't doin' as good as me. But Lugo's the only one I see. God only knows what happened to Trina and Dudek. Especially Dude."

"Leave that to me," I said, popping open my briefcase, "I've gotta earn my percentage, right? Just, ah, jot your John Henry on the dotted line, and we're in business."

Lonnie barely glanced at the contract before he signed. "Don't you even want to read it?" I asked.

"Nah. If I can't trust an old pal, who can I trust?"

"Nobody," I said. "Nobody at all."

The kitchen of La Casa Del Rey was a study in controlled chaos, busboys in Aztec-patterned serapes hastily slamming china in and out of the dishwasher, waitresses shouting orders in machine-gun Spanish over the blare of mariachi Muzak, the atmosphere a tantalizing roil of coriander, chorizo, sweet onions, and a dozen elusive scents I could only guess at. Bobby Lugo was wearing whites, working in the corner at a chopping block, his hard brown hands a blur, reducing a roast to slender strips with a razor-edged boning blade. He glanced up as I made my way toward him through the crowded kitchen, his heavy brows knitted a moment, and then his hawk-face split into a grin.

"I'll be damned," he said, laying the knife aside, "I'm seein' ghosts. Kirk Ohanian. *Que pasa*,

man, how you been?" He seized my right hand and nearly pumped my arm out of its socket.

"Not as good as you, *hermano*. You've put on a few pounds. Must be doing well."

"Hell, I put on five pounds a day just breathin' the air in here. You gain a little weight, lose a little hair, you get older, right? But not you, Kirk. You don't change. So what you doin' here? Lookin' to buy the joint?"

And I told him the truth. Or part of it anyway. Which surprised me. Truth is a rare commodity in the music biz. It's sold, or traded, but it's too valuable to just give away. Still, that's what I did, more or less.

"It don't sound like much of a deal for the bands," he frowned.

"It's not much worse than usual. Do you still play at all?"

"Sure, on weekends. I got a little mariachi combo, we do weddings, street dances, and like that. I'm playin' better than I ever did. But . . . I think you'd better forget about the Spirits, Kirk. Get somebody else."

"What's the problem? So the contract's lousy. They're always lousy. But there's a chance you'll get a hot record out of it, maybe make a few bucks. Or does flippin' tortillas pay big money these days?"

"Flippin' tortillas is an honest gig," he said evenly, "I ain't

ashamed of what I do. Which is more'n a lotta the sleazebags in the record business can say. Besides, I don't just cook here, Kirk. I own this place."

"Oh," I said. "Lonnie didn't tell me."

"That's because Lonnie doesn't know," he said, turning away, scowling down at the roast as he resumed dismembering it with his blade. "Lonnie brags about how good he's doin', but he looks kinda seedy, you know? So I didn't tell him I own the Del Rey. Figured he might put the arm on me. Helluva thing, ain't it? Twenty years ago, we had nothin', we shared everything. Now I'm makin' it pretty good, and I worry about an old friend hittin' me up for a few bucks."

"All the more reason to do the record," I said, "Lonnie can probably use the work."

"It ain't Lonnie I'm worried about. Did you keep tabs on the group after you . . . left?"

"No. I was a little ticked about the way things came down, so I, ah, I joined the army. Not one of my smoother moves. You guys spent the summer of '68 on the tour, I spent it in Vietnam, trying to stay alive."

"I'm sorry, man," he said, glancing up at me, "that must have been hard. But it wasn't no bed of roses for us, either. We got the hit record all right,

but then we went on the road, as an opening act, set up the equipment, play our set, tear it down again, sometimes two, three times a night. Played more'n three hundred shows in eight months, almost nonstop. It was great the first couple weeks, but then everybody started to burn out, started doin' speed, just tryin' to maintain. And that stuff'll kill you man, messes up your head. Trina went kinda weird and Dudek was even worse. He started believin' the studio publicity about us really *bein'* Evil Spirits, demons from hell, and that voodoo crap. Got heavy into witchcraft, bad acid . . ." He took a deep breath, staring blindly down into the tangle of bloodied meat, seeing . . . ?

"What happened?" I asked.

"It ended," Bobby said. "It ended bad. The first part of that summer was maybe the best time I ever had in my life. But the last . . . Let it be, Kirk. I don't know where Trina and Dudek are, and I don't want to."

"You're not even curious? People change, you know, they get things straightened out."

"Trina, maybe. She always was smart, even when she was spaced out. But not Dude. He was too far gone."

"You don't know that, Bobby, not for sure. But you do know Lonnie needs the bread. So why not sign on? If I don't find the

others, or they can't do the gig, no harm done, right? And there's always the chance that things'll work out better this time. You're older now, smarter. Why not give it a shot? For old time's sake?"

He stared at me for what seemed like a long time, his dark eyes cloudy, thoughtful. Then he shrugged. "You know, I said you haven't changed much, Kirk, but I was wrong. You've changed a lot. Back then you were full of ideas, big plans. Now you sound like just another scuzzball agent. But the hell of it is, you could be right. You want me to sign, fine, I'll do it, but if Trina and Dudek are in the shape I think they're in, I don't wanna know about it. Okay?"

"Fair enough," I nodded, placing the contract on a clear spot on the counter, handing him a pen, "but things might just work out. You never know."

"Yes I do. And so do you. Is this contract okay?"

"Sure," I lied. "It's fine."

"I'll take your word for it," he sighed, scrawling his signature, "never could understand these things." The cuff of his jacket left a dark smear of blood below his name.

"You're doing the right thing, Bobby. You won't be sorry."

"I'm sorry already," he said, handing me the contract. "Hey, Kirk? You still mad over Dude

cuttin' you out back then?"

"It was a long time ago," I said.

"Yeah, but . . . Ohanian. That's an Armenian name, right?"

"That's right. So?"

"So I met a few Armenians over the years. Thing is, I don't think I ever met one who forgot nothin'. Especially a bad turn."

"Like I said, it was a long time ago."

"I guess it was," he said, "but sometimes it seems like yesterday."

"I know the feeling," I said.

Technically, it's illegal to trace someone by using their Social Security number. That doesn't mean it's impossible, just expensive. My secretary hit on one of her contacts in some Social Security office, and got half lucky. Dudek's account was listed as inactive, no deposits to it in years. But Trina La Pierre was now Trina Donovan, and working as a real estate agent up in Santa Barbara. With a little more finagling, Joyce got me an appointment for an evening showing under the name Mr. Kirk.

The appointment was for eight o'clock and I arrived a bit early. The house was a redwood tri-level in the Santa Ynez foothills west of Goleta, a handsome enough place, with a view of the sea, but deserted now. Apparently no one had lived

there in years. I wandered around back, found a lawn chair on the weathered sundeck, and watched the pleasure boats circling aimlessly as the sun melted like a copper penny into the Barbara Channel.

"Mr. Kirk? I'm Mrs. Donovan. Am I late?"

And I thought Joyce had finally blown one. The woman marching confidently up the sundeck steps surely couldn't be the Trina La Pierre I'd known. She was a blonde, for one thing, with a busty, squarish figure, where Trina'd been willowy . . .

But she hesitated as she held out her hand, and paled. "You're . . . Kirk," she said slowly, "Ohanian? Is that right?"

"Absolutely," I said, "how have you . . ." But she wasn't listening. She reached up to touch my face, tentatively, as though she might burn her fingertips on my skin. I felt the tension in her touch, vibrating like a bowstring. Her pallor deepened and she began to sway. I grasped her shoulders and eased her gently down onto the lawnchair. "Trina, what's wrong?"

"Ohgodohgodohgod," she murmured, hugging herself, looking down at the deck, rocking slowly. "I'll be okay, I'll be okay." She wasn't talking to me. It was a mantra, a chant of reassurance, for herself. And

after awhile she stopped. Then she seized my wrist, and held it fiercely for a moment, her fingernails digging into my flesh. And then let it go.

"You really are Kirk, aren't you?" she said carefully. "And you're alive?"

"Of course," I said, "look I'm sorry if . . ."

"It's okay, it's okay," she mumbled, taking a deep breath. Her eyes were streaming, thin traces of mascara spiderwebbing down her cheeks. "I, ah, I thought it was happening again. That I was . . . seeing things. Flashing back. God." She took another shaky breath, risked a closer look into my face, and managed a rictus of a smile. "Jesus, you look terrible, Ohanian. You look like you've seen a ghost."

"I'm not sure I haven't. You scared me to death."

"Believe me, it was mutual."

"Look, I'm really sorry about this," I said, "I wanted to surprise you, but—"

"It's not your fault, I, um, had a bad time a few years ago, wound up in a sanitarium. LSD residue, they said, or maybe Chinese speed. Stuff takes years to clear your system sometimes. Probably lucky it wasn't worse. There was a time, if I found a pill in a parking lot, I'd pop it to see where I'd go. I'll be all right in a minute. So. I take it you're not really in the

market for a house?"

"No, I'm afraid not."

"Good," she said, rummaging through her purse for a tissue; "I've done enough pitches for one day anyway."

"Then maybe you'd like to listen to mine." And again I found myself being reasonably truthful about the deal. A strange feeling. Old behavior patterns triggered by seeing people from that summer again? I don't know. All I knew was, it would have been difficult to lie to her, even though dishonesty's what I do best. She dabbed at her face while I talked, and as she wiped away her makeup, it was as though she erased the camouflage of the years. She was older now, a little heavier, a lot harder, but I sensed she was essentially unchanged. And from out of nowhere, the ache of losing her as a friend wounded me again.

"It's a nice dream," she said when I'd finished. "Not the record deal, just the idea of singing again, with friends. But I'm not into dreams any more. There's no way it can happen, Kirk."

"Why not? If you like the idea—"

"Damnit, you saw what happened to me just now. I didn't just visit that damned sanitarium, I was there nearly three years trying to reassemble myself out of spare parts. My husband left—" she swallowed hard,

her eyes brimming again, threatening to wash away her control. "I have a child. A girl. A lovely, lively, baby girl. And she'll always be a baby. Downs syndrome. Bad luck? Bad drugs? They weren't sure. But my husband was. And so am I. So don't give me any song and dance about the good old days, Ohanian. You weren't there."

"Which wasn't my fault, exactly."

"No," she said, eyeing me sharply. "It wasn't your fault. Is that what this is about, Kirk? Payback time? Because we dumped you to get a shot at a recording contract?"

"Maybe there's an element of that involved. I worked damn hard to get you that contract, hell, I picked the song that won it for you—"

"They told us we needed a manager with more experience," she said flatly. "They said either we replaced you, or no deal. So we were young, and stupid, and selfish, and we shafted you and they stuck us with some studio stooge. He bled us dry and threw us away and maybe it's what we deserved. I was sorry then, and I'm a lot sorrier now. Is that what you want to hear?"

"Maybe. But not from you. It was Dude's decision. He told me so at the time. My buddy Dude. But that's history. What matters is what's happening now.

I've got a shot at the big time, Trina, a job one step from the top. And you've got a shot at a second chance for Evil Spirits."

"If you need the Spirits to land your job, you're in trouble, Kirk, because Dude was the heart of the group, and there's no way he can do it."

"Do you know where he is?"

"No. I haven't seen him in years."

And someone stepped lightly on my grave. She was lying.

"Then how can you be certain he'll say no?"

"I *don't* know what he'd say, but he couldn't do it if he wanted to. There was nothing left of him at the end. He was doing drugs nonstop, and black magic. He was too burned out to write music any more and he was trying to get it back. And when the studio dumped us . . . He lost it, Kirk, went psychotic. Totally over the edge."

"But you lost it, and you managed to get it back together."

"I got help. Dude . . . didn't."

"How do you know?"

"He . . . came to see me. A long time ago. Seventy maybe, or '72. I was married then. He and two friends stopped by the house. College kids. He said he'd gone back to school. Kirk, I hardly recognized him. Short hair, white shirts, neckties, the three of them looked like robot clones. They even talked alike, heavy into Jesus and radical

politics. Dude must've babbled for half an hour about revolution, the rape of the working class, all that crap."

"A lot of people get political in college."

"Look, he wasn't just *talking*, damnit! He was raving. He was still crazy. He'd done a one-eighty from where he'd been, a complete personality change, but his eyes—wait a minute. I can show you."

She rummaged in her purse, came up with a photo folder, flipped through it, and handed a snapshot to me. She was right. I scarcely recognized him. He looked like a campus recruiter for the Hitler Youth League, staring rigidly into the lens with fanatic intensity. He seemed scarcely more familiar than his two cohorts in the background, resembling them more than he did the man I'd known. I glanced at the back of the snapshot. No date.

"If this was that long ago, why are you still carrying the snap?"

"To remind me. That it's dangerous to dream too hard."

"There's more to this than just a visit and a snapshot, isn't there? What else happened?"

She turned away from me and walked to the edge of the deck, staring blindly into the sunset, hugging herself. "He phoned me," she said, her voice barely a whisper. "A few months

later. In the middle of the night. He was . . . hysterical, 'not making much sense. He, ah, he said they'd killed somebody. And it was only the beginning of the slaughter. He told me to take my family and hide, that the revolution had begun."

"If he was as unstable as you say, he was probably just—"

"No," she said, turning to face me, meeting my eyes, "he was serious about the killing. I believed him. I think it was true."

"Any reason to think so? Did the police ever contact you?"

"No, but it doesn't matter. He's lost, Kirk. Let him go."

"I can't do that. And you were lying a minute ago when you said you hadn't seen him, weren't you?"

"Are you so sure you want to find him? He blamed you for what happened, you know. For abandoning us."

"Blamed *me*? He was the one that—"

"Kirk, he's crazy! He lost everything he cared about, everything! And maybe he needed to hang the blame on someone, I don't know, but all these years I thought that—" she swallowed hard, her eyes brimming again. "I thought that you might have been the one he killed. That's why it was such a jolt to see you here. I thought you were dead."

"I—see," I said slowly. "Well,

as it happens, I'm not dead. And I'm not going to kick this deal in the head just because Dude's got a reality adjustment problem. There's too much at stake. So save me some legwork, Tina. Tell me where he is."

"I—can't do that, exactly. But I know where he was. A year or so ago I was driving through Montebello, on the edge of the barrio, and I saw him on the street, or at least I think I did. His face was scarred, but I'm fairly certain it was Dude. He was walking arm in arm with, ah, with another derelict. A bum. Both of them laughing at nothing. Street crazies. If it was him."

"And you think it was."

"But don't you see? It doesn't matter. He can't do your damned album. There's nothing left of him."

"I don't need an album," I said bluntly, "I just need his name on a contract. He cheated me out of my shot at the fast lane once. He's not going to do it again."

"And that's all this is to you? A step up the ladder? My God, Kirk, you used to care about people, about us. What the hell happened to you?"

"The same thing that happens to everybody else," I said. "Life."

L.A.'s a great town to get lost in, which is why there are so

many outfits who specialize in finding people. I was running short on time, so I contacted Kearny's, one of the best dead-skip agencies, gave them the snapshot, and had them run an all-stops-out sweep of the flophouses and missions in the Montebello area. It took them two days, pushing me uncomfortably close to that "end of the week" boast I'd made to Spitzer, two days of mulling over what Trina told me, and wondering if she'd lied about where she'd seen Dude. If she'd seen him at all. But the morning of the third day the agency called and said they'd located him, at a mission in Pico Rivera. Maybe.

The San Leandro Street mission was an old, gray brick ex-supermarket, its front windows blinded by graffiti-sprayed plywood sheets. Inside, the place was a cavern, dank and subterranean after the mid-afternoon glare of the street, lit only by a few flickering fluorescent tubes in the naked steel rafters high overhead. A kitchen/dining area occupied one end of the building, and another section was cordoned off for sleeping, no beds, just plastic sheeted mattresses arranged in crude rows on the grubby tile floor. The rest of the place was literally a dump, a storeroom for supermarket debris, dusty stacks of beige metal shelving,

dented produce coolers, wire display racks like withered trees, drunkenly atilt.

Ragged derelicts shambled aimlessly through the barren aisles, or huddled in clusters, sharing cigarettes and muted conversations. In the kitchen area, workers in street clothes and hairnets were assembling supper, emptying cardboard boxes and burlap bags of bulk foodstuffs into vats the size of cement mixers. The only other figures in view were a couple of maintenance types shuffling behind pushbrooms. And Dude.

He was sitting on a battered desk next to the sleeping area, talking to another derelict, and even with the photograph, I hardly knew him. His face was death-camp gaunt, his right cheek distorted by a deep, puckered scar, livid streaks radiating from it like fracture cracks in a windshield. His hair was the color of moldy hay, spiky, cropped close to his skull with crude shears. He was wearing a castoff tweed sportcoat with one leather elbow patch dangling like a scab, a soiled T-shirt, jeans, ragged sneakers. And though I recognized him, on some visceral level I had an uneasy sense that the apparition on the desk wasn't anyone I knew. He was alien, a golem, in the body of my enemy.

But he knew me. I sensed it in the way he avoided my eyes

as I approached. I stopped a few feet away, and waited until the second derelict, a hunched crone in a tattered raincoat, noticed me, and wandered off. "Hello, Dude," I said softly, "it's been a long time."

He smiled crookedly at the sound of my voice, his face twisting even further askew, but he continued to stare at the floor, and didn't answer.

"Do you know who I am?" I asked.

"I used to, I think," he said, his voice grating like shattered glass, "a long time ago."

"I'm Kirk. Kirk Ohanian."

"No, Kirk's dead. With Dude. I killed them. They're all dead."

"I'm no ghost, and neither are you," I said evenly. "And you can save the wacko act for the social workers. I'm not buying. And look at me, damnit!" I jabbed his shoulder with my fingertips, a big mistake. He glanced up sharply, and I felt the impact of his lifeless eyes, glowing like battlefield flares, burning as they fall.

"Don't touch me again," he said.

"Fine," I said swallowing, "whatever you say."

"Why have you come here? What do you want?"

"We're, ah, we're getting the old group together again. Evil Spirits. We already have a record deal locked up. Everybody's signed on, Lonnie, Trina, Bobby

Lugo. You're the last one. We want you to sing. If you still can."

"I sing," he nodded, "at services here, every Sunday, we make joyful noise unto the Lord. But I can't leave. I—help the people here. I'm needed."

"Your old friends need you, too. Without you there's no deal. Surely you can spare them a few days."

"I'd like to," he said, frowning, "it might be good . . . But I can't leave here."

"Look, it's not like we want you for a coast-to-coast tour, we just need you for one lousy session. A few days' rehearsal, tape two or three songs, that's it. You can come right back here and blow your paycheck on pizza for everybody." I placed the contract on the edge of the desk beside him. "C'mon, Dude, sign on. For auld lang syne. What do you say?"

He didn't even glance at it. "No," he said, "I told you I can't."

"You mean you *won't*. Now listen to me, you two-bit burn-out. Twenty years ago we built a group together, you and me. We wrote songs, hocked everything we owned to buy equipment, scuffled like rats trying to break into the biz, and when I got us a shot at our first contract, you cut me out. Shafted me. I took it hard. But I learned from it, too. And I'm the one

who does the sticking now. But I never forgot what you did. And how it hurt. And I figured if there was any justice in the universe at all, someday I'd get a chance to even the score. But . . ." I took a deep breath.

"Look, this is a lousy contract, okay? Even if you get a hit out of the session, the group won't see a dime of the royalties. But I still want you to sign it, to prove that I found you. I, ah, I'll explain your situation to the studio, and I doubt anyone will follow it up. But sign it for me, Dude. Please. I need it. And you owe it to me."

He picked it up, and began reading it, his brow furrowing at the small print. "So this is its face," he said softly. "This is how it comes."

"How what comes?"

"Justice," he said, "retribution."

"I don't care about retribution any more," I sighed. "Hell, what could I wish for you that'd be worse than this place?"

"To burn is worse. To burn forever."

"What are you talking about?"

"About death. About murder. I have killed, you know. I was the Sword of the Lord—"

"Stop it," I said, cutting him off, "I know what you told Trina, but you couldn't have killed anybody. I checked. The police aren't looking for you."

"That's because they don't care. Because we killed nobody."

"Talk sense, Dude, if you—"

"You don't understand! We blew up a bank!" he said, leaning toward me, his breath rank in my face, his eyes aflame. "It was to be a symbol, a statement. Just a few sticks, and I set the timer for midnight, but . . . A wino was sleeping in the alley. A nobody. Like the people here. And . . ." The contract began to rustle in his hands. "And he died. I killed him."

"My God," someone whispered. Me, I suppose. Because, like Trina, I knew I was hearing the truth.

"I tried to make up for it," he continued, clutching my lapel, "I jumped. From the roof of my apartment building. But I couldn't die. The Lord branded my face with the mark of Cain and then brought me here. To pay, to make restitution. And I thought that if I worked hard enough, that . . . But I was wrong. It isn't my destiny He cares about. It's yours."

"Wrong again." I sighed. "God didn't send me down here unless He's a four hundred pounder stuffed into a Savile Row suit."

"Then why have you come after all this time? Coincidence?"

And someone stepped lightly on my grave. "No," I said slowly, "I suppose it's not a—coincidence exactly. But that doesn't mean—hell, I don't know what it means. But I'm not here to punish you, Dude. You're managing that just fine all by yourself. But you screwed my life up once, and I don't want it to happen again."

"What do you want me to do, Kirk?"

"I don't know. But maybe we should have a talk, a long talk, about the old days."

"I'd like that," he nodded slowly, "but . . . I don't think I can. Remembering hurts. And I get confused sometimes."

"Well," I said, "At least we still have something in common."

As usual, Spitzer was on the telephone when I walked in. I rested a haunch on the corner of his leather-topped desk, which earned me a scowl of disapproval, and waited for him to finish.

"Just get it done," he said, and hung up. I slid the contracts toward him.

"How did you do?" he asked, carefully setting the contracts aside.

"I found them all. Signed them all."

"Very good," he said. "But

since Ericson signed all the groups for the '70 album yesterday, I'm afraid you're a day late."

"It doesn't matter," I said. "I win anyway."

"What do you mean, you win? The deal was—"

"I know what the deal was. A test, you said, for the number two job at the studio, deputy hatchet man. A good idea, Todd. Too good to be true."

He didn't even blink. "What are you talking about?"

"About school days, the summer of '71. When you and Dude and a lot of other kids were young and angry and radical. And your little group set off a bomb at a bank in Berkeley that accidentally killed somebody. And years later, you're about to become head of a major studio, and you start worrying about what'll happen if your old comrade sees your face on the evening news. So you decided to locate him, to buy him off, or whatever, but without letting anyone know you were looking for him. And you came up with the reunion album idea. The summer of '68. Perfect cover. But with a couple of holes in it."

"Such as?"

"First, you picked me to find the members of Evil Spirits, a logical choice since I'd worked with them. But they canned me *before* they made it big, twenty

years ago. You wouldn't have known about it unless someone involved had told you. Someone like Dude, for instance. But your biggest mistake was bothering to find him at all. Dude's so mind-blown that even if he'd seen your picture somewhere, he wouldn't have made the connection. Hell, he barely remembers his own name."

"Then I don't suppose he'd make a very credible witness, would he?" Todd said carefully.

"No. But they say a picture's worth a thousand words." I tossed the snapshot Trina'd given me on the desk. "You've put on a lot of weight since then," I said. "You oughta watch it. You're not a kid any more. And by the way, that's a copy. The original's in my safety deposit box."

"You needn't have bothered. This doesn't prove anything."

"Not enough for a court, maybe, but it'll make a helluva story, won't it? 'Corporation president former mad bomber.' The publicity'll blow you out of this job, and any other worth having."

He didn't reply. He was frowning at the photograph, looking through it, into his past.

"Who's the third man?" I asked. "What happened to him?"

"A . . . friend," he said absently, "dead now. O.d.'d. Maybe on purpose, I never knew." He pursed his lips, and dropped the

snapshot on his desk. And when he looked up again, his eyes were metallic, and unreadable. He had a reputation in the business as a hard man, but until that moment, I hadn't realized how tough he really was. "All right," he said evenly, "maybe it happened. And maybe not. So what's the bottom line, Ohanian? How much do you want?"

"You may find this a little hard to believe," I said slowly, "but I don't *want* anything, exactly. I want to give you something."

"Like what?"

"A chance to buy back your soul, if that's the right word."

"My soul? What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"I'm not all that clear on it myself. But I've been doing some time traveling the past few days. And a lot of thinking. And I remembered why I got into this business. I wanted to manage groups, to make raw talent into something special. But I was young, and the first time I got burned, I gave up. I decided if life was a ratfight, then I was gonna be the meanest rat in the pack. And I did all right. Fought my way almost to the top of the heap. Trouble is, when I look in the mirror in the morning, I see a rat looking back. So I'm going to start all over again, and try playing the game as a human being this time."

"How? By reviving Evil Spirits?"

"No, there's nothing left of them. The business ate them alive. And that's where you come in. You must have started out with ideals, too, Spitzer. Hell, you killed somebody trying to change the world. So, now you're going to change one part of it. From the inside. Nothing heavy at first. Cut your artists a little fairer slice of the pie, maybe give a few talented nobodies a break. Try turning 'em into swans instead of duck soup."

"You're asking me to cut my own throat, Ohanian. The system can't work that way."

"Maybe not, but you're going to try. And I know you'll do your best, Todd. Because the bottom line is, you've got no choice. None at all. And now you'll have to excuse me, I've got a couple of auditions scheduled for today. New groups."

"And I'm supposed to give them contracts, is that it?"

"Only if you think they've got possibilities. I'll risk it."

"You're serious? You don't want any special favors?"

"No, that'd take all the fun out of it, and that's the whole point. I used to like this business. I want to like it again."

"Terrific," he said acidly, "you want to have fun, so I'm supposed to talk the board into giving away the store."

"If they fire you, Dude can probably get you a bed down at the mission. But if anybody can pull it off, you can, Todd. Because you're not a dreamy-eyed kid any more. You're a survivor. You'll manage all right. I'll see you around. Count on it."

"Hey, Ohanian?"

I glanced back at him from the doorway. He'd picked up the photograph, and was gazing into it again, seeing . . . I don't know. Ghosts, I suppose.

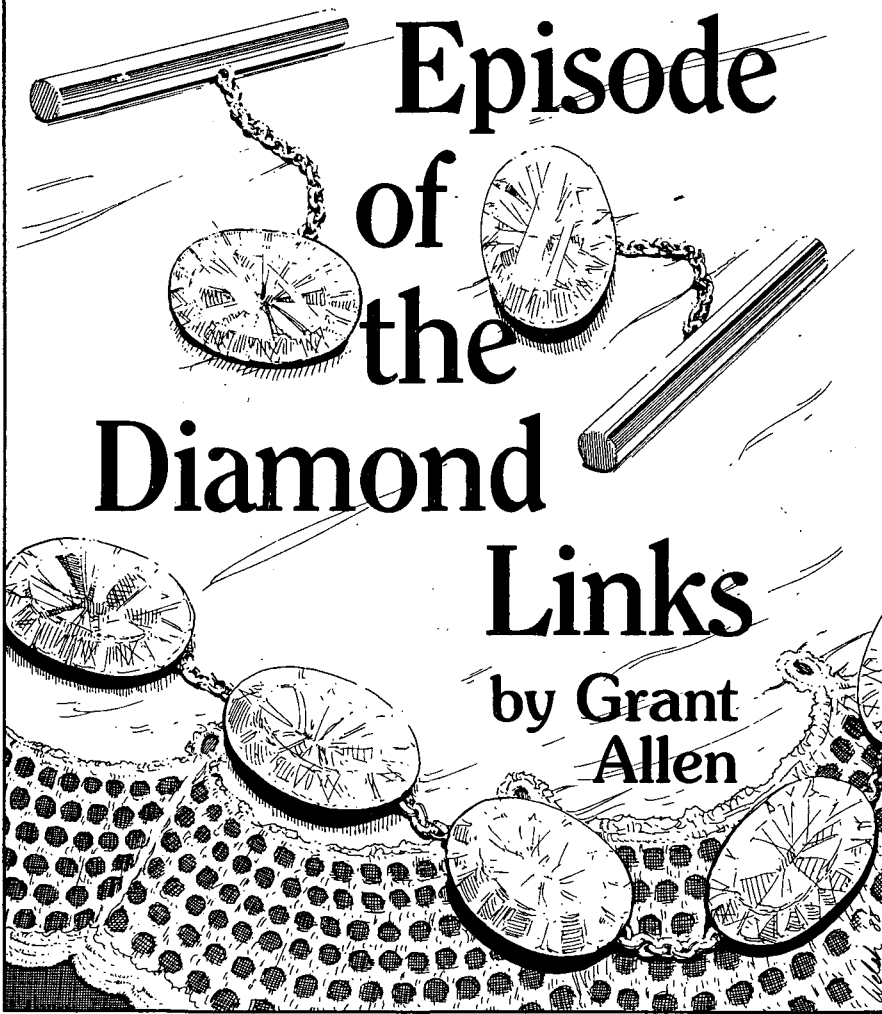
"Those were—wild times, weren't they?" he said. "When we were kids?"

"Not bad," I said. "But maybe next year'll be better."

"Yeah," he said softly. "Maybe it will."

MYSTERY CLASSIC

The Episode of the Diamond Links

A detailed black and white illustration by Patrick Welsh. It features several diamond links, which are oval-shaped with a faceted design, connected by a chain. The links are scattered across the page, with some resting on a textured, lace-like surface at the bottom. A long, thin, cylindrical object, possibly a cigarette or a pen, is positioned diagonally across the upper right. The overall style is classic and elegant, typical of mid-20th-century book covers.

by Grant
Allen

Illustration by Patrick Welsh

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“Let us take a trip to Switzerland,” said Lady Vandrift. And any one who knows Amelia will not be surprised to learn that we *did* take a trip to Switzerland accordingly. Nobody can drive Sir Charles, except his wife. And nobody at all can drive Amelia.

There were difficulties at the outset, because we had not ordered rooms at the hotels beforehand, and it was well on in the season; but they were overcome at last by the usual application of a golden key; and we found ourselves in due time pleasantly quartered in Lucerne, at that most comfortable of European hostelryes, the Schweizerhof.

We were a square party of four—Sir Charles and Amelia, myself and Isabel. We had nice big rooms, on the first floor, overlooking the lake; and as none of us was possessed with the faintest symptom of that incipient mania that shows itself in the form of an insane desire to climb mountain heights of disagreeable steepness and unnecessary snowiness, I will venture to assert we all enjoyed ourselves. We spent most of our time sensibly in lounging about the lake on the jolly little steamers; and when we did a mountain climb, it was on the Rigi or Pilatus—where an engine undertook all the muscular work for us.

As usual, at the hotel, a great many miscellaneous people showed a burning desire to be specially nice to us. If you wish to see how friendly and charming humanity is, just try being a well known millionaire for a week, and you'll learn a thing or two. Wherever Sir Charles goes he is surrounded by charming and disinterested people, all eager to make his distinguished acquaintance, and all familiar with several excellent investments, or several deserving objects of Christian charity. It is my business in life, as his brother-in-law and secretary, to decline with thanks the excellent investments, and to throw judicious cold water on the objects of charity. Even I myself, as the great man's almoner, am very much sought after. People casually allude before me to artless stories of "poor curates in Cumberland, you know, Mr. Wentworth," or widows in Cornwall, penniless poets with epics in their desks, and young painters who need but the breath of a patron to open to them the doors of an admiring Academy. I smile and look wise, while I administer cold water in minute doses; but I never report one of these cases to Sir Charles, except in the rare or almost unheard-of event where I think there is really something in them.

Ever since our little adventure with the Seer at Nice, Sir Charles,

who is constitutionally cautious, had been even more careful than usual about possible sharpers. And, as chance would have it, there sat just opposite us at *table d'hôte* at the Schweitzerhof—'tis a fad of Amelia's to dine at *table d'hôte*; she says she can't bear to be boxed up all day in private rooms with "too much family"—a sinister-looking man with dark hair and eyes, conspicuous by his bushy overhanging eyebrows. My attention was first called to the eyebrows in question by a nice little parson who sat at our side, and who observed that they were made up of certain large and bristly hairs, which (he told us) had been traced by Darwin to our monkey ancestors. Very pleasant little fellow, this fresh-faced young parson, on his honeymoon tour with a nice wee wife, a bonnie Scotch lassie with a charming accent.

I looked at the eyebrows close. Then a sudden thought struck me. "Do you believe they're his own?" I asked of the curate; "or are they only stuck on—a makeup disguise? They really almost look like it."

"You don't suppose—" Charles began, and checked himself suddenly.

"Yes, I do," I answered; "the Seer!" Then I recollected my blunder, and looked down sheepishly. For, to say the truth, Vandrift had straightly enjoined on me long before to say nothing of our painful little episode at Nice to Amelia; he was afraid if *she* once heard of it, *he* would hear of it for ever after.

"What seer?" the little parson inquired, with parsonical curiosity.

I noticed the man with the overhanging eyebrows give a queer sort of start. Charles's glance was fixed upon me. I hardly knew what to answer.

"Oh, a man who was at Nice with us last year," I stammered out, trying hard to look unconcerned. "A fellow they talked about, that's all." And I turned the subject.

But the curate, like a donkey, wouldn't let me turn it.

"Had he eyebrows like that?" he inquired, in an undertone. I was really angry. If this *was* Colonel Clay, the curate was obviously giving him the cue, and making it much more difficult for us to catch him, now we might possibly have lighted on the chance of doing so.

"No, he hadn't," I answered testily; "it was a passing expression. But this is not the man. I was mistaken, no doubt." And I nudged him gently.

The little curate was too innocent for anything. "Oh, I see," he

replied, nodding hard and looking wise. Then he turned to his wife and made an obvious face, which the man with the eyebrows couldn't fail to notice.

Fortunately, a political discussion going on a few places farther down the table spread up to us and diverted attention for a moment. The magical name of Gladstone saved us. Sir Charles flared up. I was truly pleased, for I could see Amelia was boiling over with curiosity by this time:

After dinner, in the billiard room, however, the man with the big eyebrows sidled up and began to talk to me. If he *was* Colonel Clay, it was evident he bore us no grudge at all for the five thousand pounds he had done us out of. On the contrary; he seemed quite prepared to do us out of five thousand more when opportunity offered; for he introduced himself at once as Dr. Hector Macpherson, the exclusive grantee of extensive concessions from the Brazilian government on the Upper Amazons. He dived into conversation with me at once as to the splendid mineral resources of his Brazilian estate—the silver, the platinum, the actual rubies, the possible diamonds. I listened and smiled; I knew what was coming. All he needed to develop this magnificent concession was a little more capital. It was sad to see thousands of pounds' worth of platinum and carloads of rubies just crumbling in the soil or carried away by the river, for want of a few hundreds to work them with properly. If he knew of anybody, now, with money to invest, he could recommend him—nay, offer him—a unique opportunity of earning, say, forty percent on his capital, on unimpeachable security.

"I wouldn't do it for every man," Dr. Hector Macpherson remarked, drawing himself up; "but if I took a fancy to a fellow who had command of ready cash, I might choose to put him in the way of feathering his nest with unexampled rapidity."

"Exceedingly disinterested of you," I answered dryly, fixing my eyes on his eyebrows.

The little curate, meanwhile, was playing billiards with Sir Charles. His glance followed mine as it rested for a moment on the monkey-like hairs.

"False, obviously false," he remarked with his lips; and I'm bound to confess I never saw any man speak so well by movement alone; you could follow every word though not a sound escaped him.

During the rest of that evening Dr. Hector Macpherson stuck to me as close as a mustard plaster. And he was almost as irritating. I got heartily sick of the Upper Amazons. I have positively waded

in my time through ruby mines (in prospectuses, I mean) till the mere sight of a ruby absolutely sickens me. When Charles, in an unwonted fit of generosity, once gave his sister Isabel (whom I had the honor to marry) a ruby necklace (inferior stones), I made Isabel change it for sapphires and amethysts, on the judicious plea that they suited her complexion better. (I scored one, incidentally, for having considered Isabel's complexion.) By the time I went to bed I was prepared to sink the Upper Amazons in the sea, and to stab, shoot, poison, or otherwise seriously damage the man with the concession and the false eyebrows.

For the next three days, at intervals, he returned to the charge. He bored me to death with his platinum and his rubies. He didn't want a capitalist who would personally exploit the thing; he would prefer to do it all on his own account, giving the capitalist preference debentures of his bogus company, and a lien on the concession. I listened and smiled; I listened and yawned; I listened and was rude; I ceased to listen at all; but still he droned on with it. I fell asleep on the steamer one day, and woke up in ten minutes to hear him droning yet, "And the yield of platinum per ton was certified to be—" I forget how many pounds, or ounces, or pennyweights. These details of assays have ceased to interest me: like the man who "didn't believe in ghosts," I have seen too many of them.

The fresh-faced little curate and his wife, however, were quite different people. He was a cricketing Oxford man; she was a breezy Scotch lass, with a wholesome breath of the Highlands about her. I called her "White Heather." Their name was Brabazon. Millionaires are so accustomed to being beset by harpies of every description, that when they come across a young couple who are simple and natural, they delight in the purely human relation. We picnicked and went on excursions a great deal with the honeymooners. They were so frank in their young love, and so proof against chaff, that we all really liked them. But whenever I called the pretty girl "White Heather," she looked so shocked, and cried: "Oh, Mr. Wentworth!" Still, we were the best of friends. The curate offered to row us in a boat on the lake one day, while the Scotch lassie assured us she could take an oar almost as well as he did. However, we did not accept their offer, as rowboats exert an unfavorable influence upon Amelia's digestive organs.

"Nice young fellow, that man Brabazon," Sir Charles said to me one day, as we lounged together along the quay; "never talks about advowsons or next presentations. Doesn't seem to me to care two

pins about promotion. Says he's quite content in his country curacy; enough to live upon, and needs no more; and his wife has a little, a very little, money. I asked him about his poor today, on purpose to test him: these parsons are always trying to screw something out of one for their poor; men in my position know the truth of the saying that we have that class of the population always with us. Would you believe it, he says he hasn't any poor at all in his parish! They're all well-to-do farmers or else able-bodied laborers, and his one terror is that somebody will come and try to pauperize them. 'If a philanthropist were to give me fifty pounds today for use at Empingham,' he said, 'I assure you, Sir Charles, I shouldn't know what to do with it. I think I should buy new dresses for Jessie, who wants them about as much as anybody else in the village—that is to say, not at all.' There's a parson for you, Sey, my boy. Only wish we had one of his sort at Seldon."

"He certainly doesn't want to get anything out of you," I answered.

That evening at dinner a queer little episode happened. The man with the eyebrows began talking to me across the table in his usual fashion, full of his wearisome concession on the Upper Amazons. I was trying to squash him as politely as possible, when I caught Amelia's eye. Her look amused me. She was engaged in making signals to Charles at her side to observe the little curate's curious sleeve-links. I glanced at them, and saw at once they were a singular possession for so unobtrusive a person. They consisted each of a short gold bar for one arm of the link, fastened by a tiny chain of some material to what seemed to my tolerably experienced eye—a first-rate diamond. Pretty big diamonds, too, and of remarkable shape, brilliancy, and cutting. In a moment I knew what Amelia meant. She owned a diamond *rivière* said to be of Indian origin, but short by two stones for the circumference of her tolerably ample neck. Now, she had long been wanting two diamonds like these to match her set; but owing to the unusual shape and antiquated cutting of her own gems, she had never been able to complete the necklet, at least without removing an extravagant amount from a much larger stone of the first water.

The Scotch lassie's eye caught Amelia's at the same time, and she broke into a pretty smile of good-humored amusement. "Taken in another person, Dick, dear!" she exclaimed, in her breezy way, turning to her husband. "Lady Vandrift is observing your diamond sleeve-links."

"They're very fine gems," Amelia observed incautiously. (A most

unwise admission if she desired to buy them.)

But the pleasant little curate was too transparently simple a soul to take advantage of her slip of judgment. "They *are* good stones," he replied; "very good stones—considering. They're not diamonds at all, to tell you the truth. They're best old fashioned Oriental paste. My great-grandfather bought them, after the siege of Seringapatam, for a few rupees, from a Sepoy who had looted them from Tippoo Sultan's palace. He thought, like you, he had got a good thing. But it turned out, when they came to be examined by experts, they were only paste—very wonderful paste; it is supposed they had even imposed upon Tippoo himself, so fine is the imitation. But they are worth—well, say, fifty shillings at the utmost."

While he spoke Charles looked at Amelia, and Amelia looked at Charles. Their eyes spoke volumes. The *rivière* was also supposed to have come from Tippoo's collection. Both drew at once an identical conclusion. These were two of the same stones, very likely torn apart and disengaged from the rest in the *mêlée* at the capture of the Indian palace.

"Can you take them off?" Sir Charles asked blandly. He spoke in the tone that indicates business.

"Certainly," the little curate answered, smiling. "I'm accustomed to taking them off. They're always noticed. They've been kept in the family ever since the siege, as a sort of valueless heirloom, for the sake of the picturesqueness of the story, you know; and nobody ever sees them without asking, as you do, to examine them closely. They deceive even experts at first. But they're paste, all the same; unmitigated Oriental paste, for all that."

He took them both off, and handed them to Charles. No man in England is a finer judge of gems than my brother-in-law. I watched him narrowly. He examined them close, first with the naked eye, then with the little pocket-lens which he always carries. "Admirable imitation," he muttered, passing them on to Amelia. "I'm not surprised they should impose upon inexperienced observers."

But from the tone in which he said it, I could see at once he had satisfied himself they were real gems of unusual value. I know Charles's way of doing business so well. His glance to Amelia meant, "These are the very stones you have so long been in search of."

The Scotch lassie laughed a merry laugh. "He sees through them now, Dick," she cried. "I felt sure Sir Charles would be a judge of diamonds."

Amelia turned them over. I know Amelia, too; and I knew from the way Amelia looked at them that she meant to have them. And when Amelia means to have anything, people who stand in the way may just as well spare themselves the trouble of opposing her.

They were beautiful diamonds. We found out afterwards the little curate's account was quite correct: these stones *had* come from the same necklet as Amelia's *rivière* made for a favorite wife of Tippoo's, who had presumably as expansive personal charms as our beloved sister-in-law's. More perfect diamonds have seldom been seen. They have excited the universal admiration of thieves and connoisseurs. Amelia told me afterwards that, according to legend, a Sepoy stole the necklet at the sack of the palace, and then fought with another for it. It was believed that two stones got split in the scuffle, and were picked up and sold by a third person—a looker-on—who had no idea of the value of his booty. Amelia had been hunting for them for several years to complete her necklet.

"They are excellent paste," Sir Charles observed, handing them back. "It takes a first-rate judge to detect them from the reality. Lady Vandrift has a necklet much the same in character, but composed of genuine stones; and as these are so much like them, and would complete her set, to all outer appearance, I wouldn't mind giving you, say, ten pounds for the pair of them."

Mrs. Brabazon looked delighted. "Oh, sell them to him, Dick," she cried, "and buy me a brooch with the money! A pair of common links would do for you just as well. Ten pounds for two paste stones! It's quite a lot of money!"

She said it so sweetly, with her pretty Scotch accent, that I couldn't imagine how Dick had the heart to refuse her. But he did, all the same.

"No, Jess, darling," he answered. "They're worthless, I know; but they have for me a certain sentimental value, as I've often told you. My dear mother wore them, while she lived, as earrings; and as soon as she died I had them set as links in order that I might always keep them about me. Besides, they have historical and family interest. Even a worthless heirloom, after all, *is* an heirloom."

Dr. Hector Macpherson looked across and intervened. "There is a part of my concession," he said, "where we have reason to believe a perfect new Kimberley will soon be discovered. If at any time you would care, Sir Charles, to look at my diamonds—when I get them—it would afford me the greatest pleasure in life to submit them to your consideration."

Sir Charles could stand it no longer. "Sir," he said, gazing across at him with his sternest air, "if your concession were as full of diamonds as Sinbad the Sailor's valley, I would not care to turn my head to look at them. I am acquainted with the nature and practice of salting." And he glared at the man with the overhanging eyebrows as if he would devour him raw. Poor Dr. Hector Macpherson subsided instantly. We learnt a little later that he was a harmless lunatic, who went about the world with successive concessions for ruby mines and platinum reefs, because he had been ruined and driven mad by speculations in the two, and now recouped himself by imaginary grants in Burmah and Brazil, or anywhere else that turned up handy. And his eyebrows, after all, were of nature's handicraft. We were sorry for the incident; but a man in Sir Charles's position is such a mark for rogues that, if he did not take means to protect himself promptly, he would be forever overrun by them.

When we went up to our salon that evening, Amelia flung herself on the sofa. "Charles," she broke out in the voice of a tragedy queen, "those are real diamonds, and I shall never be happy again till I get them."

"They are real diamonds," Charles echoed. "And you shall have them, Amelia. They're worth not less than three thousand pounds. But I shall bid them up gently."

So, next day, Charles set to work to higgler with the curate. Brabazon, however, didn't care to part with them. He was no money-grubber, he said. He cared more for his mother's gift and a family tradition than for a hundred pounds, if Sir Charles were to offer it. Charles's eye gleamed. "But if I give you *two* hundred!" he said insinuatingly. "What opportunities for good! You could build a new wing to your village schoolhouse!"

"We have ample accommodation," the curate answered. "No, I don't think I'll sell them."

Still, his voice faltered somewhat, and he looked down at them inquiringly.

Charles was too precipitate.

"A hundred pounds more or less matters little to me," he said; "and my wife has set her heart on them. It's every man's duty to please his wife—isn't it, Mrs. Brabazon?—I offer you three hundred."

The little Scotch girl clasped her hands.

"Three hundred pounds! Oh, Dick, just think what fun we could have, and what good we could do with it! Do let him have them."

Her accent was irresistible. But the curate shook his head.

"Impossible," he answered. "My dear mother's earrings! Uncle Aubrey would be so angry if he knew I'd sold them. I daren't face Uncle Aubrey."

"Has he expectations from Uncle Aubrey?" Sir Charles asked of White Heather.

Mrs. Brabazon laughed. "Uncle Aubrey! Oh, dear, no. Poor dear old Uncle Aubrey! Why, the darling old soul hasn't a penny to bless himself with, except his pension. He's a retired post captain." And she laughed melodiously. She was a charming woman.

"Then I should disregard Uncle Aubrey's feelings," Sir Charles said decisively.

"No, no," the curate answered. "Poor dear old Uncle Aubrey! I wouldn't do anything for the world to annoy him. And he'd be sure to notice it."

We went back to Amelia. "Well, have you got them?" she asked.

"No," Sir Charles answered. "Not yet. But he's coming round, I think. He's hesitating now. Would rather like to sell them himself, but is afraid what 'Uncle Aubrey' would say about the matter. His wife will talk him out of his needless consideration for Uncle Aubrey's feelings; and tomorrow we'll finally clinch the bargain."

Next morning we stayed late in our salon, where we always breakfasted, and did not come down to the public rooms till just before *déjeûner*, Sir Charles being busy with me over arrears of correspondence. When we *did* come down, the concierge stepped forward with a twisted little feminine note for Amelia. She took it and read it. Her countenance fell. "There, Charles," she cried, handing it to him, "you've let the chance slip. I shall *never* be happy now! They've gone off with the diamonds."

Charles seized the note and read it. Then he passed it on to me. It was short, but final: —

"Thursday, 6 a.m.

"Dear Lady Vandrift—Will you kindly excuse our having gone off hurriedly without bidding you goodbye? We have just had a horrid telegram to say that Dick's favorite sister is dangerously ill of fever in Paris. I wanted to shake hands with you before we left—you have all been so sweet to us—but we go by the morning train, absurdly early, and I wouldn't for worlds disturb you. Perhaps some day we may meet again—though, buried as we are in a north-coun-

try village, it isn't likely; but in any case, you have secured the grateful recollection of Yours very cordially,

JESSIE BRABAZON.

"P.S.—Kindest regards to Sir Charles and those dear Wentworths, and a kiss for yourself, if I may venture to send you one."

"She doesn't even mention where they've gone," Amelia exclaimed, in a very bad humor.

"The concierge may know," Isabel suggested, looking over my shoulder.

We asked at his office.

Yes, the gentleman's address was the Reverend Richard Peploe Brabazon, Holme Bush Cottage, Empingham, Northumberland.

Any address where letters might be sent at once, in Paris?

For the next ten days, or till further notice, Hôtel des Deux Mondes, Avenue de l'Opéra.

Amelia's mind was made up at once.

"Strike while the iron's hot," she cried. "This sudden illness, coming at the end of their honeymoon, and involving ten days' more stay at an expensive hotel, will probably upset the curate's budget. He'll be glad to sell now. You'll get them for three hundred. It was absurd of Charles to offer so much at first; but offered once, of course we must stick to it."

"What do you propose to do?" Charles asked. "Write, or telegraph?"

"Oh, how silly men are!" Amelia cried. "Is this the sort of business to be arranged by letter, still less by telegram? No. Seymour must start off at once, taking the night train to Paris; and the moment he gets there, he must interview the curate or Mrs. Brabazon. Mrs. Brabazon's the best. She has none of this stupid, sentimental nonsense about Uncle Aubrey."

It is no part of a secretary's duties to act as a diamond broker. But when Amelia puts her foot down, she puts her foot down—a fact which she is unnecessarily fond of emphasizing in that identical proposition. So the self-same evening saw me safe in the train on my way to Paris; and next morning I turned out of my comfortable sleeping car at the Gare de Strasbourg. My orders were to bring back those diamonds, alive or dead, so to speak, in my pocket to Lucerne; and to offer any needful sum, up to two thousand five hundred pounds, for their immediate purchase.

When I arrived at the Deux Mondes I found the poor little curate and his wife greatly agitated. They had sat up all night, they said, with their invalid sister; and the sleeplessness and suspense had certainly told upon them after their long railway journey. They were pale and tired, Mrs. Brabazon, in particular, looking ill and worried—too much like White Heather. I was more than half ashamed of bothering them about the diamonds at such a moment, but it occurred to me that Amelia was probably right—they would now have reached the end of the sum set apart for their Continental trip, and a little ready cash might be far from unwelcome.

I broached the subject delicately. It was a fad of Lady Vandrift's, I said. She had set her heart upon those useless trinkets. And she wouldn't go without them. She must and would have them. But the curate was obdurate. He threw Uncle Aubrey still in my teeth. Three hundred?—no, never! A mother's present; impossible, dear Jessie! Jessie begged and prayed; she had grown really attached to Lady Vandrift, she said; but the curate wouldn't hear of it. I went up tentatively to four hundred. He shook his head gloomily. It wasn't a question of money, he said. It was a question of affection. I saw it was no use trying that tack any longer. I struck out a new line. "These stones," I said, "I think I ought to inform you, are really diamonds. Sir Charles is certain of it. Now, is it right for a man of your profession and position to be wearing a pair of big gems like those worth several hundred pounds, as ordinary sleeve-links? A woman?—yes, I grant you. But for a man, is it manly? And you a cricketer!"

He looked at me and laughed. "Will nothing convince you?" he cried. "They have been examined and tested by half a dozen jewelers, and we know them to be paste. It wouldn't be right of me to sell them to you under false pretenses, however unwilling on my side. I *couldn't* do it."

"Well, then," I said, going up a bit in my bids to meet him, "I'll put it like this. These gems are paste. But Lady Vandrift has an unconquerable and unaccountable desire to possess them. Money doesn't matter to her. She is a friend of your wife's. As a personal favor, won't you sell them to her for a thousand?"

He shook his head. "It would be wrong," he said, "—I might even add, criminal."

"But we take all risk," I cried.

He was absolutely adamant. "As a clergyman," he answered, "I feel I cannot do it."

"Will you try, Mrs. Brabazon?" I asked.

The pretty little Scotchwoman leaned over and whispered. She coaxed and cajoled him. Her ways were winsome. I couldn't hear what she said, but he seemed to give way at last. "I should love Lady Vandrift to have them," she murmured, turning to me. "She is such a dear!" And she took out the links from her husband's cuffs and handed them across to me.

"How much?" I asked.

"Two thousand?" she answered, interrogatively. It was a big rise, all at once; but such are the ways of women.

"Done!" I replied. "Do you consent?"

The curate looked up as if ashamed of himself.

"I consent," he said slowly, "since Jessie wishes it. But as a clergyman, and to prevent any future misunderstanding, I should like you to give me a statement in writing that you buy them on my distinct and positive declaration that they are made of paste—old Oriental paste—not genuine stones, and that I do not claim any other qualities for them."

I popped the gems into my purse, well pleased.

"Certainly," I said, pulling out a paper. Charles, with his unerring business instinct, had anticipated the request, and given me a signed agreement to that effect.

"You will take a check?" I inquired.

He hesitated.

"Notes of the Bank of France would suit me better," he answered.

"Very well," I replied. "I will go out and get them."

How very unsuspecting some people are! He allowed me to go off—with the stones in my pocket!

Sir Charles had given me a blank check, not exceeding two thousand five hundred pounds. I took it to our agents and cashed it for notes of the Bank of France. The curate clasped them with pleasure. And right glad I was to go back to Lucerne that night, feeling that I had got those diamonds into my hands for about a thousand pounds under their real value!

At Lucerne railway station Amelia met me. She was positively agitated.

"Have you brought them, Seymour?" she asked.

"Yes," I answered, producing my spoils in triumph.

"Oh, how dreadful!" she cried, drawing back. "Do you think they're real? Are you sure he hasn't cheated you?"

"Certain of it," I replied. "No one can take me in, in the matter of diamonds. Why on earth should you doubt them?"

"Because I was talking to Mrs. O'Hagan, at the hotel, and she says there's a well-known trick just like that—she's read of it in a book. A swindler has two sets—one real, one false; and he makes you buy the false ones by showing you the real, and pretending he sells them as a special favor."

"You needn't be alarmed," I answered. "I am a judge of diamonds."

"I shan't be satisfied," Amelia murmured, "till Charles has seen them."

We went up to the hotel. For the first time in her life I saw Amelia really nervous as I handed the stones to Charles to examine. Her doubt was contagious. I half feared, myself, he might break out into a deep monosyllabic interjection, losing his temper in haste, as he often does when things go wrong. But he looked at them with a smile, while I told him the price.

"Eight hundred pounds less than their value," he answered, well satisfied.

"You have no doubt of their reality?" I asked.

"Not the slightest," he replied, gazing at them. "They are genuine stones, precisely the same in quality and type as Amelia's necklet."

Amelia drew a sigh of relief. "I'll go upstairs," she said slowly, "and bring down my own for you both to compare with them."

One minute later she rushed down again, breathless. Amelia is far from slim, and I never before knew her exert herself so actively.

"Charles, Charles!" she cried, "do you know what dreadful thing has happened? Two of my own stones are gone. He's stolen a couple of diamonds from my necklet, and sold them back to me."

She held out the *rivière*. It was all too true. Two gems were missing—and these two just fitted the empty places!

A light broke in upon me. I clapped my hand to my head. "By Jove," I exclaimed, "the little curate is—Colonel Clay!"

Charles clapped his own hand to his brow in turn. "And Jessie," he cried, "White Heather—that innocent little Scotchwoman! I often detected a familiar ring in her voice, in spite of the charming Highland accent. Jessie is—Madame Picardet!"

We had absolutely no evidence; but, like the Commissary at Nice, we felt instinctively sure of it.

Sir Charles was determined to catch the rogue. This second deception put him on his mettle. "The worst of the man is," he said, "he has a method. He doesn't go out of his way to cheat us; he makes us go out of ours to be cheated. He lays a trap, and we

tumble headlong into it. Tomorrow, Sey, we must follow him on to Paris."

Amelia explained to him what Mrs. O'Hagan had said. Charles took it all in at once, with his usual sagacity. "That explains," he said, "why the rascal used this particular trick to draw us on by. If we had suspected him he could have shown the diamonds were real, and so escaped detection. It was a blind to draw us off from the fact of the robbery. He went to Paris to be out of the way when the discovery was made, and to get a clear day's start on us. What a consummate rogue! And to do me twice running!"

"How did he get at my jewel case, though?" Amelia exclaimed.

"That's the question," Charles answered. "You *do* leave it about so!"

"And why didn't he steal the whole *rivière* at once, and sell the gems?" I inquired.

"Too cunning," Charles replied. "This was much better business. It isn't easy to dispose of a big thing like that. In the first place, the stones are large and valuable; in the second place, they're well known—every dealer has heard of the Vandrift *rivière* and seen pictures of the shape of them. They're marked gems, so to speak. No, he played a better game—took a couple of them off, and offered them to the only person on earth who was likely to buy them without suspicion. He came here, meaning to work this very trick; he had the links made right to the shape beforehand, and then he stole the stones and slipped them into their places. It's a wonderfully clever trick. Upon my soul, I almost admire the fellow."

For Charles is a businessman himself, and can appreciate business capacity in others.

How Colonel Clay came to know about that necklet, and to appropriate two of the stones, we only discovered much later. I will not here anticipate that disclosure. One thing at a time is a good rule in life. For the moment he succeeded in baffling us altogether.

However, we followed him on to Paris, telegraphing beforehand to the Bank of France to stop the notes. It was all in vain. They had been cashed within half an hour of my paying them. The curate and his wife, we found, quitted the Hôtel des Deux Mondes for parts unknown that same afternoon. And, as usual with Colonel Clay, they vanished into space, leaving no clue behind them. In other words, they changed their disguise, no doubt, and reappeared somewhere else that night in altered characters. At any rate, no such person as the Reverend Richard Peploe Brabazon was ever

afterwards heard of—and, for the matter of that, no such village exists as Empingham, Northumberland.

We communicated the matter to the Parisian police. They were *most* unsympathetic. "It is no doubt Colonel Clay," said the official whom we saw; "but you seem to have little just ground of complaint against him. As far as I can see, messieurs, there is not much to choose between you. You, Monsieur le Chevalier, desired to buy diamonds at the price of paste. You, madame, feared you had bought paste at the price of diamonds. You, monsieur the secretary, tried to get the stones from an unsuspecting person for half their value. He took you all in, that brave Colonel Caoutchouc—it was diamond cut diamond."

Which was true, no doubt, but by no means consoling.

We returned to the Grand Hotel. Charles was fuming with indignation. "This is really too much," he exclaimed. "What an audacious rascal! But he will never again take me in, my dear Sey. I only hope he'll try it on. I should love to catch him. I'd know him another time, I'm sure, in spite of his disguises. It's absurd my being tricked twice running like this. But never again while I live! Never again, I declare to you!"

"*Jamais de la vie!*" a courier in the hall close by murmured responsive. We stood under the verandah of the Grand Hotel, in the big glass courtyard. And I verily believe that courier was really Colonel Clay himself in one of his disguises.

But perhaps we were beginning to suspect him everywhere.

BOOKED & PRINTED

by Mary Cannon



Eddie Margolis, first encountered in Stephen Paul Cohen's *Heartless*, is back from Florida and ready to begin his new job as private eye trainee in New York City. The Big Apple welcomes its prodigal son with the standard doses of gloomy weather, grimy streets, and garish crimes, but Eddie is able to resist returning both to the bottle and to Florida. What he's most unhappy about is the fact that his boss—the former cop who's supposed to be teaching him the ropes—is never around. Thus Eddie begins his investigation of a missing corporate attorney with a chip on his shoulder, and a lot of chutzpah. He's been hired by a prestigious law firm to find out why one of their junior attorneys left his office in the middle of the day to run down to the lobby for a snack—and then never returned to work. Before Eddie learns the truth he encounters some fascinating folks, and unearths a key to a scam of shocking proportions. Cohen has practiced real estate law in New York, and his experience has given the plot in this latest, titled **Island of Steel** (Morrow, \$17.95, 350 pp.), a truly fresh twist. Besides, Eddie makes darn good company.

Laura Denning, a well-known author of true-crime books, wakes up in a nursing home with a total memory loss. She gradually learns that she was found in her country cottage in a catatonic state, clutching a carving knife and soaked in blood. With the

amused and admiring assistance of a Scotland Yard man assigned to the case, Laura pries the truth of her background out of those around her: her estranged husband, her village doctor, her husband's mother. At the same time, her memory begins to return in patchy scraps. By the time she returns to the small British town where her cottage is, she's prepared to flush out a killer. **The Affair at Royalties** by George Baxt, originally published in 1971, sparkles with Laura's wit and intelligence, and is surprisingly suspenseful (considering the fact that for much of the book our heroine is confined to a hospital bed). The publisher's blurb compares this book to "a Christie," and for once I'm inclined to agree with the copywriter. Fans of old fashioned mysteries, those peopled with interesting British characters and written with a light touch, should try *The Affair at Royalties* (IPL, \$4.95, 188 pp.).

Lover Man by Dallas Murphy was nominated for an Edgar in 1987, and I heartily second the nomination. Set in Manhattan, the novel is narrated by an ingenuous young man by the name of Artie Deemer, who blithely and unashamedly lives off the earnings of his dog Jellyroll, a lovable mutt with a doghouse full of endearing and photogenic qualities. Jellyroll is, in fact, the R-r-ruff Dog, a celebrity spokesdog for a popular brand of canine cuisine. Anyway, Artie's peace is shattered by the news of the murder of Billie Burke, his former girlfriend, and Billie's death launches this likable underachiever into a tangled and dangerous mess when he receives her message from beyond the grave. A series of photographs, several more of Billie's lovers, and a couple of deaths-to-go—it's all part of a plot that peaks to a shocking ending. Murphy has combined whimsy, serio-comic characters, violent action, and a smashing plot to create a very special P.I. novel. I'll be sorely disappointed if Artie and Jellyroll don't find themselves in trouble again. (Pocket Books, \$3.95, 256 pp.)

Murder Behind Locked Doors (by Ellen Godfrey, St. Martin's \$17.95, 318 pp.) is how it all starts. Brian Taylor Systems, a small and successful data processing firm in Toronto, needs another financial v.p. to replace the one that's died. So Brian calls on Jane Tregar, a corporate headhunter for Orloff Associates; Jane, who got her start by originally putting together Brian's "team" some years earlier, reluctantly agrees to look for a replacement. Her reluctance stems from the fact that she's unsure why the dead man was killed, and not happy about the idea of luring someone else to an early grave. To ease her conscience in that direction, she

begins to snoop, and soon learns that Brian and the dead v.p. were engineering a merger with a large American firm, a move that more than one of Brian's "teammates" opposed. Tregar is a well-drawn protagonist, intelligent but not always smart, loyal but not always likable. We get an insider's view of big business here, and how corporate headhunters work. We see what the stresses of a high-tech, highly visible corporate life can do, and it makes a very credible background to modern-day murder.

The Case of the Fragmented Woman by Cleo Jones (Worldwide, \$3.50, 220 pp.) should appeal to fans of Susan Isaac's *Compromising Positions* a few years back. Protagonist Mary Sable, bored housewife personified, has accompanied her friend Jill to an ad agency party thrown to celebrate the introduction of a new soap product. The star of a locally-produced soap opera, set and shot in San Francisco, seems to be having an affair with Jill's husband, a writer on the TV show. Jill's worries should be over when Hermoine's bodiless head turns up on the set. The only problem is that the police suspect Jill of the crime. This is very offbeat, satirical, and surely not intended to be entirely credible.

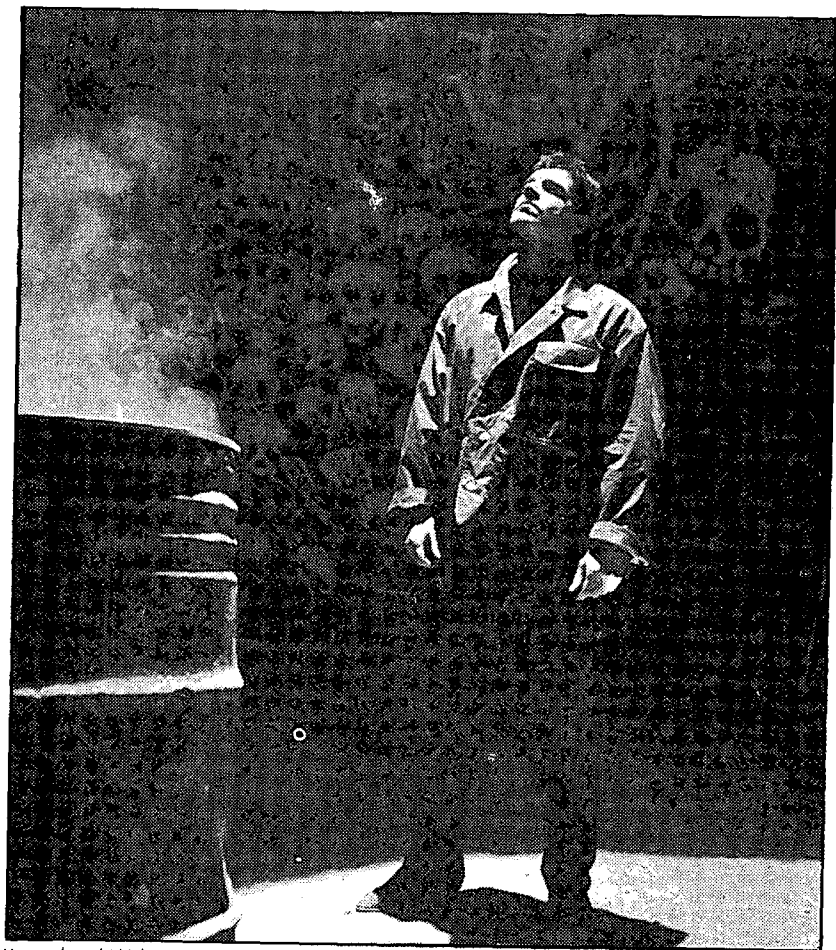
Falling Up the Stairs can hurt the most, so claims the irrepressible hero in James Lileks' first novel (Dutton, \$19.95, 310 pp.). Jonathan Simpson is at a low point in his short life. His girlfriend has gone on to greener pastures, and the idiot at the upstate Minnesota weekly, where he writes a sort of gossip column, has printed Jonathan's ribald and irreverent "notes" by accident. When his aunt's aged butler appears at Jonathan's door and begs him to come home, the reporter feels that flight might be the better part of valor. Thus he finds himself the lord of the manor (his eccentric old aunt having passed along to a greater reward), the salvation of two aged retainers, and the journalistic foe to the A.I.L., the soon-to-be-dreaded Alimentary Instruction League, a secret Minneapolis terrorist organization whose motto is "Eat Right Or Die." This is an exuberant, wildly comic farce of a mystery, with a delightfully droll narrator and a host of memorable characters. One can no more read this novel with a straight face than its author can write a simple declarative sentence. Fans of Dick Lochte's *Sleeping Dog* should seek out *Falling Up the Stairs*, and then save it for an especially gloomy day. You'll be rewarded with lots of silly cheer.

I've long been a fan of Mickey Friedman's, but I think her latest, **Magic Mirror**, (Viking, \$15.95, 247 pp.), will widen her audience

greatly. She's given us a fresh new heroine in Georgia Lee Maxwell, a society editor for a Florida paper who decides to change her life. She moves to Paris, eking out a living sending home a column for a monthly glossy. She's on assignment, in fact, following a famous art restorer to a small private museum, when masked men enter, shoot the guard, and steal a legendary mirror allegedly used by the prophet Nostradamus to divine the future. This is the story of a lifetime, of course—that is, if Georgia can manage to live long enough to tell it. Georgia Lee is a delight, a bright and funny lady with a breezy narrative voice. The Paris setting is exotic and fun, and the plot is original. I'm looking forward to her next adventure.

There's an intriguing premise to Archer Mayor's **Open Season** (G.P. Putnam's Sons, \$17.95, 320 pp.). Set in Vermont in winter-time, the novel opens when an old woman uses her shotgun to kill a man who enters her back door in the early hours of the morning. It seems that for days she'd been terrorized; finally, her cat had been brutally killed and a note was left promising that the intruder would return for her that night. But the intruder turns out to be a victim himself, a man whose beloved dog had been kidnapped, and who'd been told to bring money to this address and enter the darkened house by the back door in the middle of the night. Police lieutenant Joe Gunther quickly learns what else the two had in common: they both sat on the jury that convicted a man, Bill Davis, of the brutal murder of Kimberly Barris three years earlier. And no one, it seems, wants that case reopened, even Gunther's old friend and mentor, the cop who was in charge of the investigation back then. Mayor has written a taut suspense novel, with strong characters, a punchy plot, and a very sympathetic protagonist. *Open Season* is a notable debut of a talented writer, and it deserves a big audience.

I like William L. DeAndrea's Matt Cobb mysteries, and **Killed in Paradise**, the latest, is no exception (Mysterious Press, \$15.95, 182 pp.). This one has a couple of other appealing elements, namely the fact that the bulk of the book is a shipboard adventure (if you can't get away on a cruise yourself, the next best thing is to go via book!); and the point of the trip is a mystery crusie, with well-known authors (fictional, however) and a multitude of mystery fans. Too soon, however, the play-acting becomes real-life, and Matt again finds himself the resident sleuth. It's all in a day's work for the TV network's chief troubleshooter, who certainly guessed the surprise ending long before I did.

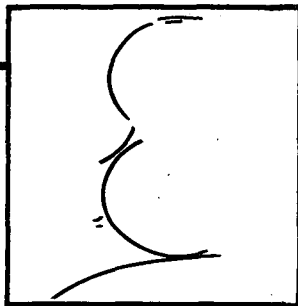


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Colin Friels as cameraman Harvey Denton in *Ground Zero*.

MURDER BY DIRECTION

by William Heller



During the 1950's the British conducted atomic bomb testing in the Australian outback, with the support and cooperation of the Australian government. Three decades later the government's Royal Commission held hearings in Sydney to investigate claims of uncounted aborigine deaths and of alarming cancer rates among soldiers working on the tests. These true events are the basis for the Australian thriller **Ground Zero**.

Harvey Denton (Colin Friels) earns his living as a cameraman in the advertising field. Denton goes from shooting a TV commercial featuring dancing hot dogs to being shot at by sinister forces working for the government—British or Australian.

Our hero, whose father was

an army cameraman during the A-bomb testing, becomes unwittingly involved in uncovering a coverup perpetrated at the highest levels of government. The British claimed that lands surrounding the Maralinga-site bomb tests were uninhabited. But Denton becomes aware that his father may have had conclusive proof, on film, that the British knew many aborigines were killed as a result of the Maralinga tests.

He first stumbles into the web of high-level intrigue with the burglary of his loft—his father's home movies being the only things removed. With the Royal Commission investigation on the news nightly, and with his father's work for the army during the A-bomb tests, Denton ends up at the Australian Security and Intelligence Office (ASIO) to see if they can

help piece things together. It is there that he finds his stolen films in government custody.

Agent Trebilcock (Jack Thompson) confides in Denton the story of an airplane, recently dug up in the desert and heavily contaminated with radiation, which served as a tomb for the skeletal remains of what ASIO thinks is his father. He shows the younger Denton a photo of a skull with a hole in its forehead, evidence of murder. Although Trebilcock seemingly befriends the cameraman, Denton doesn't quite trust the agent, or the government for that matter. The only person he seems to be able to turn to is his estranged wife, a TV news reporter who may have her own agenda. He also has a young son who lives with the wife.

Meanwhile, the Royal Commission hearings are drawing to a close with aborigine representatives desperate for hard evidence that the British were negligent, at the least, and murderous, at the worst, in conducting their tests without regard to residents of the testing area.

Denton, armed with the knowledge that his father was killed to keep him quiet, knows that he cannot stay quiet. He must continue his search for the evidence—his father's film—which will undoubtedly shake the commission and the

governments of Australia and Britain as well.

The search sends him sneaking into classified army film archives, up against ASIO, the British, and the Royal Commission. It brings him to Maralinga, the site of the tests in question and the outback home to Prosper Gaffney (Donald Pleasence), an eccentric, wheelchair-bound veteran. Gaffney lost his vocal cords to cancer and speaks only with the help of an electronic device, making him sound like a robot. This hermit, who lives in a cave, was best mate with the senior Denton during their army days and gradually comes to trust the son enough to help him in the search for the missing film.

Colin Friels, as Harvey Denton, pulls off the role of the average man caught up in something beyond his control with ease. Jack Thompson is well-suited to his role as an Australian secret agent. He may remind American audiences of the Peter Graves role in television's *Mission Impossible*.

Following chase scenes through the spectacular, barren outback is a dramatic scene—and Denton does create a scene—at the Royal Commission hearings. A weak suspense story might have ended with that dramatic confrontation, but *Ground Zero* continues and closes with a stunning finale.

THE STORY THAT WON



The September Mysterious Photograph contest was won by Karen Fechko of Ukiah, California. Other honorable mentions go to Stephen J. Sommer of Thiells, New Falls, Montana; Elizabeth Price Fairfax, Virginia; Shirley Kawa Preston S. Rodriguez of Katymantown, Wisconsin; A. B. Her-

man of Sacramento, California; Robert G. Stewart of Oakland, California; Wayne Pereira of Richwood, West Virginia; Alice Robbins of East Lyme, Connecticut; Kathy Liska of Lisle, Illinois; Alan Gottesman of Albany, New York; and Christine McClurg Stonehouse of Port Clinton, Ohio.

DEATH-RATTLE by Karen Fechko

"I'll get in there for lunch, if it's the last thing I ever do!"

It was the dead of winter, and cold as the grave. The tree was stripped to the bone, but I held on, too stiff to move except for my teeth.

"They can't keep me out. I'd give my life to get in that club."

Anger pushed me out on the limb. I jumped.

The inside of the clubhouse was appalling. Cobwebs shrouded the corners and the dingy ghosts of sheeted sofas. The place stunk like a crypt.

"Freeze," a disembodied voice shot out of the gloom. "Make like a corpse, Skinny. What's your name?"

"Bb-Bbb-Bones," I stuttered.

"You're under arrest, Ms. Bones. PC 602, Trespassing."

"But people are dying to get in here!" I choked. "And these guys are just a bunch of zombies."

"That's their constitutional right, ma'am."

"When I applied for membership, they said, 'Drop dead.'"

"So file discrimination charges through the proper channels. Trespassing is trespassing."

"How did you know I don't belong here?" I started to show him my black-widow decoder ring. Instead he hung a pair of bracelets on me.

"It's a dead giveaway, Ms. Bones." He pushed me through the front door; its rusty hinges screeched a death-knell. "Look at this sign." He stabbed with one finger. "No ghouls allowed."

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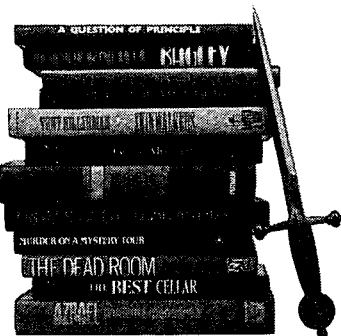
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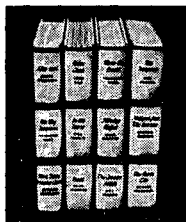
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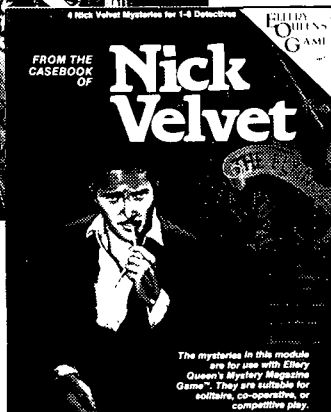
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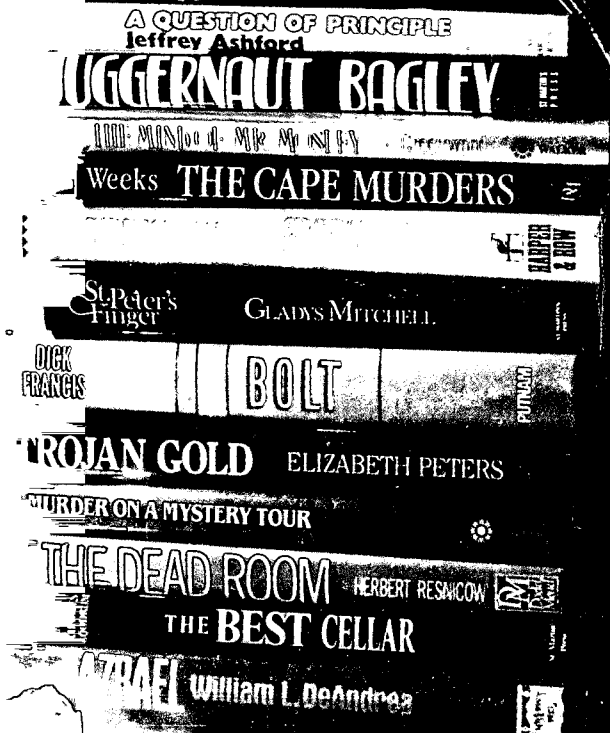
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